GEORGE BUBP
(SUCCESSOR TO J. AND
BOOKSELLER AND LIBR
167, NEW BOND STRE
LONDON.

Boxes, Stall for

Presented to
The Library
of the
University of Toronto
by
Miss B. M. Corrigan

A SIREN.

BY

T. ADOLPHUS TROLLOPE,

AUTHOR OF "THE GARSTANGS OF GARSTANG GRANGE,"
"PAUL THE POPE AND PAUL THE FRIAR,"
ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
SMITH, ELDER & CO., 15, WATERLOO PLACE.
1870.

[*The Right of Translation is reserved.*]

PR
5699
T4S4
1870
v.2

LIBRARY
729066
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

BOOK III.

"SIRENUM POCULA."

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	"Diva Potens."	3
II.	An Adopted Father and an Adopted Daughter	16
III.	"Armed at All Points."	30
IV.	Throwing the Line	40
V.	After-thoughts	54
VI.	At the Circolo	67
VII.	Extremes Meet	79
VIII.	The Diva shows her Cards	90
IX.	One Struggle more	107

BOOK IV.

THE LAST DAYS OF THE CARNIVAL.

I.	In the Cardinal's Chapel	119
II.	The Corso	136
III.	"La Sonnambula."	154

CHAP. PAGE

IV. The Marchese Lamberto's Correspondence 172

V. Bianca at Home 186

VI. Paolina at Home 206

VII. Two Interviews 218

VIII. A Carnival Reception 231

IX. Paolina's return to the City 244

BOOK V.

WHO DID THE DEED?

I. At the City Gate 261

A SIREN.

BOOK III.

"SIRENUM POCULA.'

A SIREN.

CHAPTER I.

"DIVA POTENS."

QUINTO LALLI was the name by which the *prima donna* had presented the old gentleman who had shared her travelling-carriage to the Marchese Lamberto as her father. And Quinto Lalli was his real name; but he was not really her father. Nor had she any legitimate claim to the name of Lalli. She had never been known by any other, however, during the whole of her theatrical career; and there were very few persons in any of the many cities where the Lalli was famous, who had any idea that the old man who always accompanied her was not her father. Indeed, Bianca had so long been accustomed to call and to consider him as such, that

she often well nigh forgot herself that he held no such relationship to her.

The real facts of the case were very simple, and had nothing romantic about them. Old Lalli was a man of great musical gifts and knowledge. He had been a singing-master in his day; an *impresario* too for a short time; and sometimes a kind of broker, or middle-man between singers in want of an engagement and managers seeking for "available talent;" and a hunter-up of talent not yet available, but which, it might be hoped, would one day become such.

It was in the pursuit of his avocations of this latter sort, that he had one day, about fifteen years before the date of the circumstances narrated in the last chapter, chanced to meet with a little girl, then some twelve years old, on the hopes of whose future success he had resolved to build his own fortunes. It was time that he should find some foundation for them, if they were ever to be built at all, which most of those who knew Signor Quinto Lalli deemed not a little improbable; for he was of the sort of men who never do make fortunes.

He was fifty years old when he had met with the little girl in question, and had done nothing yet towards laying the foundations of any sort of fortune.

Unstable, improvident, unthrifty, fond of pleasure, and not fond of work, nothing had succeeded with him. Nevertheless, a cleverer man in his own line, or a shrewder judge of the article he dealt in, than Quinto Lalli did not exist in all Italy. And his judgment did not fail him when he fell in with little Bianca degli Innocenti.

Persons unacquainted with Italian things and ways might suppose that the above modification of the "particle noble" in Bianca's *family* name was indicative of a very aristocratic origin. Italians, however—and specially Tuscans—would draw a different conclusion from the premises. The family "Degli Innocenti" is very frequently met with in Tuscany; but the bearers of the name do not, for the most part, take great heed of their family ties. The "Innocenti," in a word, is the name of the foundling-hospital in Florence; and those of whose origin nothing is known save that they have been brought up by that charity, are often called after it, and known by no other name. Little Bianca's father, or possibly her grandfather, must have been some such Jem, Jack, or Bob "of the Foundlings," and left no other patronymic to his race.

Quinto Lalli fell in with the child one day in the

dirty and miserable little town of Acquapendente, just on the Roman side of the frontier line dividing the Papal territory from Tuscany, as he was travelling from Florence to Rome. He was travelling by the diligence, which always used to remain a good hour or more at Acquapendente, for the transaction of passport and dogana work. There, strolling, for want of something better to do, through the dilapidated streets of the poverty-stricken little town,—which in those days told the traveller most unmistakably how great was the difference between prosperous Tuscany, which he had just left, and the wretched Pope's-land which he was entering—Quinto Lalli heard a child's voice, and instantly stopped and pricked up his ears.

Looking round, he saw a little creature, barely clad, happy amid the surrounding squalor, sitting with its little bare feet and legs dabbling in the sparkling water in the broken marble tank of a once magnificent fountain. There she sate alone in the sunshine, and carolled, with wide-opened throat, like any other nature-made songster.

Quinto Lalli, with startled ear, listened attentively; got round to where he could see the child's face; marked well, with knowing eye, the little brown feet

and legs bare to the knee; and then determined to abandon the fare paid for the remainder of his diligence journey to Rome.

The business for the sake of which he made that sacrifice was easily and quickly done. A bargain is not difficult when that which is coveted by one party is deemed a burden and encumbrance by the other. And Quinto Lalli became the fortunate purchaser of the article of which he had so judiciously appreciated the value.

Quinto had his little purchase well and carefully educated—educated her himself in a great measure, as far as her voice was concerned—and took care that every attention was paid, not only to her musical culture, and to the preservation and enhancement of her beauty—which, with great comfort as regarded the ultimate issue of his speculation, he saw every year that passed over her develop more and more—but also to her intellectual cultivation. For Lalli was a clever man enough to know, that if a stupid singer with a fine voice can charm so as to be worth a hundred, an intelligent singer with an equally fine voice, can charm so as to be worth two hundred.

And the old singing-master was good and kind to his pupil: firstly, because he had no unkindness

in his nature, and secondly, because it was in every way his interest to conciliate the girl. She had been brought out at eighteen, and had now been nine years on the stage—nine years of success, which ought to have enriched both teacher and pupil.

They had very soon come to understand each other in matters of interest. Lalli had begun by taking all her large earnings. But Bianca very quickly let her protector understand that such an arrangement did not meet her views at all. The ingratitude, when she owed everything to him alone! No, Bianca had no intention to be ungrateful—*anzi!* she looked upon Lalli as her father, and hoped she always should do so; but she had no intention of being treated like a child. So long as she could earn anything, her adopted father should want for nothing. She asked nothing better than to continue to live with him, and work for both of them.

And, in truth, her grateful kindness and fondness for the old man whom she had so long looked on as a father was Bianca's strongest point in the way of moral excellence. In all their nine years of partnership she had worked for him as much as for herself. But her nine years of success ought to have made both the old man and his adopted daughter

comfortably well off. And it had done nothing of the kind.

They had laid by nothing. Old Quinto had all his life been recklessly extravagant and thriftless; and his mode of education had not made Bianca less so. If he was fond of dissipation and pleasure, she was not less fond of them on her side. Careful as her education had been, it was hardly to be expected that it should have been eminently successful in forming a high standard of moral character. The demands made by society upon its members in general in the clime and time in question were not of a very exacting nature; and the expectations of society in this respect from a person in Bianca's position were more moderate still. Nor were the precepts, counsels, example, or wisdom of her protector at all calculated to guide the beautiful singer scatheless through the dangers and difficulties incidental to her position.

In short, for nine years Bianca had worked hard —had earned a great deal of money, and had spent it all (except what Lalli had spent for her) in dissipation, the sharers in which had been chosen by the beautiful actress—as kissing goes—by *favour*, and not with any view to their ability to pay the cost.

And now La Lalli had reached her twenty-seventh year; and was very nearly as poor as when she began her career. And certain small warnings, unimportant as yet, and wholly unsuspected, save by herself and old Quinto, had begun to suggest to her the expediency of thinking a little for the future. She and Quinto Lalli had had a very serious conversation on the subject just before the commencement of that season at Milan, which, as has been hinted, had ended somewhat disagreeably for the charming singer.

The real truth of the matter was that the difficulty in question had arisen not from any tendency in the lady to behave in the Lombard capital with more reprehensible levity than, it must unfortunately be admitted, she had been very well known to have behaved in other places and on other occasions; but from a change in her manners in a diametrically opposite direction. It was a change of tactics, which the strictest moralist must have admitted to involve an improvement in moral conduct, that got the hardly treated Diva into trouble.

The Austrian Government, as we all know, is, or was, a paternal government—a very paternal government. And the governor who ruled in the Lombard capital was quite as much intent on playing the

"governor," in the modern young gentleman's sense of the word, as good old paternal Franz himself in his own Vienna. But this paternal government was not of the sort which ignores the well-authenticated fact that "young men will be young men." On the contrary, it proceeded always, especially as regarded its more distinguished sons, on the largest recognition of this truth. Wild-oats must be sown; the "governor" knew it, and the law allowed it. But they should be so sown as to involve as little prejudicial an after-crop, as may be—as little prejudicial especially to those distinguished sons who cannot be expected to refrain from such natural sowing.

And enchanting Divas may assist in such sowing, and be tolerated in so doing by a not too rigidly exacting paternal government—may be held in so assisting not to step beyond the sphere of social functions assigned to them by the natural order of things in a manner too offensive to the mild morality of a paternal government, as long as such joint wild-oat cultivation shall in nowise threaten to interfere with the future tillage of less wild and more profitable crops by those distinguished young scions of noble races, to whose youthful aberrations a paternal government is thus wisely indulgent.

So long, and no longer. Mark it well, enchanting Divas. Enchant if you will; 'tis your function. But do not think to enchain! Enmesh a young Marchese in the tangles of Neæra's hair. A paternal governor puts his fingers before his eyes; and lets a smile be seen on his lips beneath them. But do not seek to bind him by less easily broken ties. A vigilant and moral governor frowns on the instant; and a paternal government well knows how to protect its distinguished sons by very summary and effectual process.

But when for a poor Diva there comes also the time when that pleasant wild-oat sowing seems no longer a promising pursuit, what does the paternal wisdom decree as to her future? Why, *she* must reap as she has sown—or helped to sow. See ye to it, Divas. Such providence is beyond our function.

And thus it had come to pass that the trouble had arisen which had resulted in inducing the Diva Bianca to turn her back on ungrateful Milan, and her face towards welcoming Ravenna. In that conference between Bianca and her old friend and counsellor, which has been mentioned, it had been fully brought home to the Diva's conviction that for

her the pleasant time of wild-oat sowing had come to an end. "Would that the year were always May." But old Quinto Lalli knew that it wasn't. And it had been concluded between him and his adopted daughter that it was high time for Bianca to take life *au sérieux;* — to understand thoroughly that *noctes cœnæque deûm,* with champagne suppers and love among the roses, must be, if not necessarily abandoned, yet steadily contemplated as a means and not an end.

What if—

> Love, free as air, at sight of human ties,
> Shakes his light wings, and in a moment flies ?

The warning of the verse teaches that the skittish god must not be scared by a premature exhibition of the noose hid beneath the sieve of corn. Champagne suppers and love among the roses—yes. But there should be, also, cunningly hidden, the noose among the roses.

And to this wisdom the Diva her well-trained mind did seriously incline, during that last Milan campaign. Nor did her moral aim seem to be without good promise of success. The sleek young colts with their shiny coats, glossy, with the rich pastures of the Lombard plains, pranced up and nibbled, all

unconscious of the hidden noose. One fine young unsuspecting animal, the noblest of the herd, came so close to the noose that Bianca thought her work was done, and was on the point of casting it over his lordly head—and he all but enchanted into such docility as to submit to it, even seeing it.

When lo! with sudden swoop of hand, sharp vibrating police decrees, an unsleeping paternal government darts down the fabric of our hopes, sends off the nearly captured prey, loud neighing and with heels kicked high in air, but safe, to his ancestral Lombard pastures, and whirls away the too dangerous enchantress into outer space.

Sorrowfully the baffled fair goes forth (a graceful picture somewhere seen of paradise-banished Peri with pretty stooping head, recalls itself to my mind as I write the words); sorrowfully but not despairing, —and wiser than before.

And yet before she goes seeking fresh fields and pastures new, and meditating new emprise, wealthy Milan shall itself equip her for the next campaign. For much of such expedient outfit Milan can supply, which, in remote Ravenna, might in vain be sought. There, beneath the shadow of those marble walls, where once the sainted Borromeo preached, the

cunningest Parisian artists may be found—so rich in corn and wine and silk are Lombard plains—modists and mercers, corset-makers, lacemen, skilled so to clothe the limbs of beauty, that every fold shall but display the perfect handiwork of nature, yet add to it the further grace of art. Makers of tiny slippers and such dainty bootlets as show forth and enhance the separate beauty of each inch of outline of rounded ankle, arched instep, and slender length of foot, shall lend their help. And if envious Time have something done to blur the bloom upon the cheek, or blot the clear transparent purity of skin;—*sunt certa piacula*,—there are not wanting means for helping a mortal Diva to some of the prerogatives of immortality in these respects.

And thus equipped, everything is ready, Quinto mio; we turn our backs on haughty Milan, and *nova regna petentes cras ingens iterabimus æquor*, that is to say, the wide plains of Lombardy.

So Bianca and her faithful Quinto journeyed forth on that interminably long flat monotonous Emilian road, with no accompanying sound of music on their departure, but with the much-improved prospects, which have been described, on their arrival.

CHAPTER II.

AN ADOPTED FATHER AND AN ADOPTED DAUGHTER.

When Bianca, on the evening of her arrival at Ravenna, rejoined Quinto Lalli at the handsome and convenient lodging which had been provided her, after having passed an hour or two, as has been related, in being presented to the notabilities of the city, and receiving a great deal of homage at the Palazzo Castelmare, she had already learned many useful things.

Imprimis, she had learned that the Marchese Lamberto was a bachelor; that he was—though what young girls call an old man—still almost in the prime of life, for a man so healthy and well preserved; that he was a remarkably handsome and dignified gentleman; that he evidently occupied the very foremost place in the esteem and respect of his fellow-citizens; that he was rich; and that he appeared from

all those little signs and tokens of manner, which such a woman as La Diva Bianca can interpret so readily, the last man in the world likely to fall in love with such a travelling Diva as herself. She had learned, further, that the Marchese Ludovico was his heir; that the said Ludovico might be judged, by all those same signs and tokens, to be very much such a man as might be likely to fall over head and ears in love with a beautiful woman, who should make it her business to cause him to do so; and yet further, that this Marchese Ludovico was just the sort of man, whom, if she might permit herself to join pleasure with business, she would very well like so to operate on. She had heard a poem read to her by the Conte Leandro, and had decided that, if he were the wealthiest man in all Ravenna, no sense of her duty to herself could prevail to make her do anything but run away from him at the first warning of his approach. Nevertheless, from him, even, she had learned something. She had become acquainted with the fact, whispered in his own exquisitely felicitous manner, and with the tact and judicious appreciation of opportunity peculiar to him, that Ludovico di Castelmare was, to the great sorrow of his friends and family, enslaved by a certain Venetian artist,

65

then resident in Ravenna,—a girl really of no attractions whatever.

Thus much of the *carte du pays* of that new country, in which her own campaign was to be made, and of which it so much imported her to have the social map, she had learned, when she found Quinto Lalli waiting for her to take possession of their new home.

"Well, *bambina mia*,—my baby," for so the old man often called her, "what sort of folk have we come among? How do you like the appearance of the country?"

"*Eh, papa mio, che volete?* I have seen only a bit of it. It is rather early to judge yet," said Bianca.

"Not too early for your quickness, *bambina mia*. Besides, you may be sure you have seen most of what you are likely to see, and what it most concerns you to see. The Cardinal Legate was not likely to come out to meet you, I suppose; nor does it much matter to you to see his Eminence."

"Well, what I have seen, I like. As for the theatre, that Marchese Lamberto, whom you saw, knows what singing is as well as you do. I shall please him on the stage; and, if so, as I see very

well, I shall please all the rest of Ravenna. But——"

"But what? There is always a 'but.' What is it this time?" said the old man.

"As if you did not know as well as I!" said Bianca, with a little toss. "Is what I can do on the theatre of Ravenna the thing that is most in my thoughts?"

"'Twas you who mentioned it first," said Quinto.

"I spoke of it merely with reference to that man, the Marchese Lamberto di Castelmare. He is one of the first, if not the very first, man in the city; and everybody is cap in hand before him. Evidently a rich man."

"And he is a musician, you say?" rejoined Quinto.

"*Fanatico!* But what matters that; except, indeed, as a stepping-stone? What has music done for me? The Marchese Lamberto is a bachelor, Quinto."

"Ha! what, the old man?" said Quinto, looking sharply at her.

"Yes, the old man, as you call him. Not so old but he might be your son, friend Quinto. But there is the young man, the Marchese Ludovico, whom

you also saw, when they met us on the road. He is the nephew and heir to the other—a bachelor too—and as pretty a fellow as one would wish to see into the bargain; a charming fellow."

"So was the Duca di Lodi at Milan," said the old man, quietly; "a very charming fellow—charming and charmed into the bargain. But——"

"Yes! I don't need to ask the meaning of *your* 'but.' We know all about that; but what is the good of going back upon it?" said Bianca, throwing herself at full length upon a sofa, and tossing her hat on to the ground, with some little display of ill-temper, as she spoke.

"Only for the sake of the light past mistakes may throw on future hopes," replied Quinto, with philosophic calmness.

"Bah—mistakes—what mistake? There was no mistake, but for that infamous old wretch of a governor," said Bianca, with an expression which the individual referred to would hardly have recognized as beautiful, if he could have seen it.

"Yes! I know. May the devil give him his due! But, *bambina mia*, there are wretches of governors here too, it is to be feared, no less infamous."

"What do you mean? What did we come here then for?" cried Bianca, rearing herself on her elbow on the sofa, and looking at her old friend with wide-opened eyes of angry surprise.

"In the first place, *cara mia*, because it was necessary to go somewhere; and, in the second place, because I should be very much at a loss to name any place where the governors are not infamous wretches, every whit as bad as at Milan. 'Tis the way of them, my poor child. But you see, Bianca dear, to return to what we were saying, there *was* a little mistake at Milan. The Duca di Lodi did not go off into the country, and leave you *plantée là*, to please himself."

"Who ever thought he did? No, poor fellow, he was right enough. But what was the mistake, I want to know?"

"You could bring no influence to bear, except upon himself, you know."

"Of course not. How should I? *E poi?*"

"And he could not do as he pleased," said Quinto, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "That was the mistake, *cara mia*, to endeavour to bring about an object, by influencing some one who had no power to act for themselves in the matter."

"A very pleasant Job's comforter you are,

to-night, Quinto. I don't know what you are driving at?" said Bianca, staring at him.

"Only this, my precious child. I was set thinking of the mistake at Milan by what you said of these two men, the uncle and nephew. Has it not come into your clever head, *mia bella*, that we might find here the means of avoiding a repetition of that error?"

"Ah—h! Now I see what you are at. The uncle—hum—m—m," said Bianca, meditatively; and then shaking her head with closely shut lips.

"And why not the uncle, *bambina mia?* I am sure the few words you have said about him are sufficient to point out that an alliance with the Marchese di Castelmare would be an advantageous one for any lady in the land," said old Quinto, with a demure air, that concealed under it just the least flavour in the world of quiet irony.

"I won't deny, *papa mio*, that, being humble as becomes my station," replied Bianca, in the same tone, "I should be perfectly contented with the style and title of Marchesa di Castelmare. But what reason have we for thinking that there would be any less difficulty in becoming such than in becoming Duchessa di Lodi? That, between ourselves, is the question."

"And what difficulty lay in the way of becoming Duchessa di Lodi? Certainly none that arose from the Signor Duca. Governors and fathers, and uncles and aunts, and police commissaries, and the devil knows what, all interfered to keep two young hearts asunder, and spoil the game. And why did they interfere?—the devil have them all in his keeping! Because all the world agrees to believe that such springalds as the Duca di Lodi can't take care of themselves. Because it is considered that the titles and acres of such, if not their persons, should be protected against—against the impulses of their warm hearts, shall we say? Now, do you think that the world would consider any such protection necessary in the case of the Marchese Lamberto? Would any governors, or fathers, or uncles, or aunts, or commissaries, interfere to prevent him from doing as he pleased in such a matter?"

"No, I suppose not!" replied Bianca, thoughtfully; "but if no father or uncle did, a nephew might. It is always the way; people get out of the leading-strings put on them by their elders, only to be entangled in others wound round them by their sons and daughters and nephews and nieces! The poor old man is beguiled. We must prevent him

from making such a fool of himself! And the interference is all the worse and the more fatal, because the poor old man would not only make a fool of himself, but beggars of his protectors."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed old Quinto Lalli with a quiet, almost noiseless laugh; "it is very well and shrewdly said, *bambina mia*. But between the two times of interference, my Bianca, there is a happy medium, an intervening space, a high table-land, we may say, after the dominion of fathers and uncles has been escaped from, and before that of sons and nephews begins—a short time, during which a man may and can please himself. Now, it seems to me, that your Marchese—pardon me for the anticipation, it is a mere figure of speech,—your Marchese di Castelmare, I say, seems to me to be just in that happy position!"

"I don't know that, I have not seen enough to be sure about that yet. That young fellow, the Marchese Ludovico, does not look to me a likely sort of man to stand by quietly and see himself cut out of houses and lands! And besides,—it strikes me—"

"Speak out your thought, *bambina mia;* I am sure it is one worth hearing. And between us, you know——"

"Well, between ourselves then," continued Bianca; while a smile, half of mockery and half of pleasure, writhed her lips into changing outlines, each more bewitchingly pretty than the other, and her eyes were turned away from Quinto to a contemplation of the slender dainty foot peeping out from beneath her dress, as she lay on the sofa;—"between ourselves, *papa mio*, from one or two small observations, which I chanced to make to-day, it strikes me that the Marchese Ludovico might possibly feel other additional objections to the establishment of any such relations, as you are contemplating between me and his uncle, besides the likelihood that they might be the means of cutting him out of his heirship."

"Ha, I see, I see; nothing more likely! *Per Dio, bambina mia*, you lose no time! *Brava la Bianca!* And perhaps I may conclude, from one or two small observations that I have been able to make myself, you would prefer to win on the nephew! Eh, *cara mia*?" said the old man, looking at her with a sly smile.

"Pshaw!" cried Bianca, with a toss of her auburn ringlets, and a shrug of her beautiful shoulders; "I must do my duty in that state of life to which it has pleased God to call me,—as the

nuns at St. Agata taught me. But between uncles and nephews, I suppose any girl would say, nephews for choice!"

"But you see, my child, the devil of it is that it would be the Milan story over again. You would have all the family to fight against. A Cardinal Legate can be quite as despotic, and disagreeable, and tyrannical as an Austrian governor. You may be very sure that these people have some marriage in view for this young Marchese, the hope of the family! We know that the Marchese Lamberto is hand and glove with the Cardinal. And there would be an exit from Ravenna after the same fashion as our last!"

"I know for certain already, that there is a marriage arranged between the young Marchese and no less a personage than the niece of the Cardinal Legate himself," said Bianca.

"Well then; that is not very promising ground to build on, is it, *bambina mia!*" replied Quinto.

"It may be, that as far as the man himself is concerned, the match that has been made for him would be rather the reverse of a difficulty in the way," rejoined Bianca.

"But the difficulty will not come from the man

himself, *cara mia!* It would be doing you wrong to suppose that to be at all likely. I don't suppose it; but—do you imagine that the Cardinal Legate will permit you to snatch his niece's proposed husband from out of her mouth! It would be a worse job than the other," said Quinto, shaking his head emphatically.

"So that you are all for the uncle, *papa mio?*" rejoined Bianca, yawning, as if she were tired of discussing the subject.

"Well, I confess it seems to my poor judgment the better scheme, and indeed a very promising scheme. Depend upon it, my child, an old man, who is his own master, is the better and safer game," replied Quinto.

"Very well! Have at the old man then, as you call him; though, as I have told you, Quinto, he is *not* an old man—not over forty-five I should say; at all events the right side of fifty, I'd wager anything! But I tell you fairly, that a less promising subject I never saw. A man, who has lived till that age a bachelor, though the head of his family,—and a bachelor of the out-and-out moral and respectable sort, mind you,—the great friend of the Cardinal; trustee to nunneries, and all that sort of thing!—a

man who looks at you and speaks to you as if he was a master of ceremonies presenting a Duchess to a Queen,—a man, I should say, who had never cared for a woman in his life, and was very unlikely to begin to do so now," said Bianca, yawning again as she finished speaking.

"*Bambina mia*," replied Quinto, "you are a very clever child, and you know a great many things. But you have not yet sufficiently studied the elderly gentleman department of human nature. If the Marchese Lamberto is as you describe him, it *may* be, it is true, that he is one of those men for whom female beauty has no charm, and on whom any kind of attack would be thrown away and mere lost labour. But it is far more likely that the exact reverse may be found to be the case! A thousand circumstances of his social position, or even of his temper and turn of mind, may have kept him a bachelor,—may have kept him out of the way of women altogether. He may be found cautious, haughty, backward to woo, requiring to be wooed, in love with the respectabilities of his social standing; but depend upon it, *bambina mia*, if you can once awaken the dormant passion of such a man, you may produce effects wholly irresistible,—you may do anything with him!

His love would be like a frozen torrent when the thaw comes! It would dash aside every opposition that could be offered it. The calculated and calculating tentatives, and coquettings and nibblings of your practised lovers, who have been in love a dozen times, would be as a trickling rill to an ocean wave, compared to what might be expected from the passion of a heart first strongly moved at the time of life the Marchese has reached. Fascinate such a man as that, and in such a position, *bambina mia*, and all the governors, and all the Cardinals that ever mumbled a mass, won't avail to prevent him from being your own!"

"Well, I suppose you are right, Quinto. And I suppose that that is what it must be!—But—well! it is time to be going to bed, I suppose; I am tired and sleepy!" said Bianca, rousing herself after a pause from a reverie into which she seemed to have fallen, and yawning as she got up from the sofa.

CHAPTER III.

"ARMED AT ALL POINTS."

THE *quartiere* which La Lalli found prepared at Ravenna for her and her travelling companion was a very eligible one. It consisted of a very nicely-furnished sitting-room, with a bed-room opening off on one side for herself, and another similarly situated on the other side for her father. There was also, behind, one little closet for a servant to sleep in, and another, still smaller, intended to serve as a kitchen.

On the morning following the conversation related in the last chapter Bianca, hearing Quinto coming out of his bed-room into the sitting-room about nine o'clock, called out to him from her bed:

"Oh, papa! I forgot to tell you last night that the Marchese and Signor Stadione are to be here at one o'clock to-day to hear me, and settle about the night of the 6th, you know."

"All right, *bambina mia!* I will be back in

time. I'm going to the café to get some breakfast," called out Quinto through the door.

"Yes. But, papa, be here at one o'clock, and do not come back before that. *È inteso?* And send me a cup of chocolate from the café."

"*Inteso!* I'll be here at one, and not before," said the old man through the door, with special emphasis on the last words.

Then Bianca called her maid, told her to bring the chocolate to her as soon as it came from the café, and then to come and dress her at ten. Whether the intervening time was spent in sleep or meditation may be doubted; but, at all events, when the hour for action came Bianca was ready for it.

By means of the skilled and practised assistance of Gigia Daddi, the maid who had been with her ever since the first beginning of her stage career, the Diva had completed her toilette by half-past eleven. But she had had, to a certain degree, a double toilette to perform. All the component parts of a rich and very becoming morning-costume had been selected and assorted with due care, and minute attention to the effect each portion of it was calculated to produce in combination with the rest; and then they had been—not put on, but laid out in order on the bed.

The more immediate purpose of the Diva was to array herself differently—differently, but by no means with a less careful and well-considered attention to the result which was intended to be produced.

The magnificent hair was brushed till it gleamed like burnished gold as the sun-rays played upon it. But when ready to be coiled in the artistic masses, which Gigia knew well how to arrange, variously, according to the style and nature of the effect designed to be produced, it was left uncoiled, streaming in great ripples over back and shoulders in its profuse abundance. An exquisite little pair of boots, of black satin, clasping ankle and instep like a glove, were chosen to match the black satin dress laid out on the bed: but, like the dress, were not put on. The place of the black satin dress was supplied by a wrapper of very fine white muslin, edged with delicate lace, so shaped with consummate skill that, though the snowy folds seemed to lie loosely within the girdle that confined them at the waist, no part of the effect of the round elastic slimness of the waist was lost; open at the neck, from a point about a span beneath the collar-bone, it allowed the whole of the noble white column of the grandly-formed throat to be

visible from its base above the bosom to the opening out of the exquisite lines about the nape of the neck into the tapering swelling of the classically-shaped head. The exact arrangement of the shape of this opening of the dress, from the throat down to about a hand's-breadth above the girdle, was very carefully attended to; the lace-edged folds of the muslin being three or four times drawn a little more forward so as to conceal, or a little back so as to show, a more liberal glimpse of the swelling bosom on either side, by the doubting Diva, as she stood before the glass.

"*E' troppo, così?*" she said to her attendant at last. "Is that too much so?"

Gigia looked critically before she answered, "To receive, yes,—a little, perhaps. But to be caught unawares, no; and then with a handkerchief, you know——"

"Oh, yes! One knows the exercise," said Bianca, with a laugh; "blush and call attention to it by covering it with one's handkerchief, which falls down as often as one chooses to repeat the manœuvre. *A chi lo dite?*"

"Style?" said Gigia.

"Sentimental,—eyes soft and dreamy; therefore

the very faintest blush of rouge. Yes; not a shade more."

"You won't put your bottines on?"

"No; there'll be time afterwards. Give me a pair of bronze kid slippers. After all, there is nothing that shows a foot so well: and look here, Gigia, draw this stocking a little better; I'd almost as soon have a wrinkle in my face as in the silk on my instep. That's better! The narrow black velvet with the jet cross for my neck,—nothing else. Now, you understand? Anybody who comes after one o'clock may be admitted; before that you will let in no soul save the Marchese Lamberto, in case he should come. I don't at all know that he will. And, Gigia," continued her mistress, as she passed into the sitting-room, "draw this sofa over to the other side of the fireplace, so as to face the window; ten years hence, when you have to place a sofa for me, you may put it just contrariwise—so, with the head at the side of the fireplace, and push the table a little further back so as to leave room for the easy-chair there to stand near the foot of the sofa facing the fire. That will do. Now, be sure of your man before you let him in. The Marchese Lamberto, mind, an elderly gentleman—not the Marchese

Ludovico, who is a young man. If he or anybody else should come before one o'clock tell them that I can see nobody till that time. Now, don't bring me the wrong man; and, Gigia, if he comes, don't announce him, you know. Just open the door quietly, and let him walk into the room without disturbing me—you understand?"

"*A chi lo dite, Signora mia! Lasciate fare a me!* Is it the first time?" said Gigia.

"If only one could hope that it would be the last," returned her mistress with a half laugh, half sigh.

By the time all these arrangements were made it was nearly twelve o'clock; and Bianca, dismissing her maid, placed herself, not without some care in the arrangement of her delicate draperies, on the sofa.

The judicious Gigia had said that the extent of snowy bosom exposed was not too liberal, due consideration being had to the circumstance that the Diva was to be caught by an unexpected surprise in an undress. So, as Bianca meant to be very much surprised, she carefully, and with dainty fingers, drew back the muslin on either side just a thought, so as to permit to an exploring eye merely such a

suggestive peep of the swelling curves on either side as might furnish an estimate of the outline of the veiled heights beyond. She smiled, half with pleased consciousness and half with self-mockery, as she did so: then carefully arranged her drapery so as to allow two slim ankles to be visible just at the point where they crossed each other in a position which exhibited the curved instep of one slender foot in a full front view, and the side of the other negligently thrown across it. The *pose* was artistically perfect. Lastly, with one or two dexterous touches and shakes, she so arranged her wealth of hair as to combine an appearance of the most perfect *negligée* with a thoroughly artistic disposition of it, which, while it displayed to the best advantage the tresses themselves, served also to heighten the effect of the contours of neck and bust, which they partly showed and partly concealed.

And then the Diva waited patiently.

She had, as she had said to Gigia, no certain knowledge that he would come, nor even any very clear reason to believe that he would do so—that he would come, that is to say, earlier than one o'clock, at which hour it had been arranged that he should meet Stadione there. Nevertheless, Bianca had a

strong persuasion that he would come earlier. Despite what she had said to Quinto Lalli of the circumstances and signs which seemed to indicate that the Marchese was not a man likely to be exposed to danger from such attacks as the Diva meditated making on him,—despite the fact that she had said to herself also all that she had said to her old friend, there had been something about the Marchese's manner—something in that last pressure of palm to palm that had set Bianca speculating as to the meaning of it. It was not a mere manifestation of admiration; the Diva was used enough to that in all its forms, and could read every tone of its language. It was more like wonder and curiosity,—at all events, it was not indifference. She had seen with half an eye, and without the slightest appearance of seeing it, that the Marchese could not keep his eyes away from her. During the drive to the city, and afterwards at the Palazzo Castelmare, while she was making the acquaintance of the principal people of the city, it had been the same thing. And nothing could be further, than was the Marchese's manner, from the bold, unabashed staring, which such beautiful Divas as Bianca have often to endure. He evidently was devouring her with his eyes on the sly.

Evidently he did not wish to be observed looking at her as he did look. Whenever her own eyes caught him in the fact, his were on the instant withdrawn: to return, as Bianca well marked, on the next instant.

Then, after those first words, which he had addressed to her at their meeting in the road, she had noted that he did not speak to her, as she sat by his side in the carriage, with the simple ease and freedom of indifference. There was almost something approaching to a manifestation of emotion in his manner of addressing her. It could not be that this elderly gentleman,—this very mature Marchese, had fallen in love with her already. Such an idea would have been too absurd! Yet his whole bearing was odd and ill at ease.

It had seemed to himself as if some subtle material influence affected him, as he sat by her side,—as if a magnetic emanation came forth from her that mounted to his brain, and disordered his pulses, and the flow of his blood. He had sat by the side of women as beautiful before now, and never been conscious of being affected in any similar manner. What it was that produced such an effect upon his nervous system,—what was the matter with

him, he could not for the life of him imagine. It was unpleasant; he did not like it at all. And yet some irresistible stimulus and curiosity drove him to prolong rather than to avoid the sorcery.

Bianca was by no means fully aware of the power and of the strength of the sorcery which she was exercising on the Marchese. But she understood a great deal more about it than he did. And when, in making the appointment for him and the *impresario* to call on her at one o'clock, he had asked her if that was too early for her habits, and she had replied, that she was always afoot much earlier than that, Bianca had felt persuaded that he would be at the door at an earlier hour.

And her experience, or her instinct, with reference to such matters had not deceived her.

The quarter-past twelve had not struck, when the Diva heard a knock at the door of her apartment.

CHAPTER IV.

THROWING THE LINE.

In the next instant Bianca heard the door of the room in which she was sitting opened very gently; it was Gigia who opened it, so gently as to enable her mistress to keep her eyes on a book she held in her hand, apparently unconscious that she was not alone. The Marchese Lamberto advanced too paces within the room, and then stopped gazing at the exquisite picture before his eyes. Bianca knew that all her preparatory cares were doing the work they were intended to do. But no sound had yet been made to compel her to recognize her visitor's presence; and she remained as motionless as a recumbent statue.

"I fear, Signora—," said the Marchese, after a few instants given to profiting by the rare opportunity a singular chance had given him,—"I fear, Signora——"

"Santa Maria, who is there!" cried Bianca in a voice of alarm, starting to her feet as she spoke with a bound, that none but so skilled an artist and so perfect a figure could have executed with the faultless elegance with which she accomplished it.

"A thousand pardons, Signora; your servant—"

"The Marchese Lamberto! It is unpardonable in the woman—to have so failed in her duty—towards your Excellency! It is I who have to beg your indulgence, Signor Marchese. Can it be one o'clock already? In truth I had no idea it was so late; and I have still to dress! How can I apologize to your Excellency sufficiently for appearing before you in this dishabille?"

"Nay, Signora, it is in truth I who have to apologize; it is *not* yet one o'clock, it is not much past twelve! And I feel that I am guilty of an unwarrantable intrusion. But I hoped for the opportunity of having a few words of conversation before the hour named for our little business with our good Signor Ercole. Permit me to assure you, Signora, that if your servant had given me the least hint that you were not yet—ready to see any visitor——"

"If only your Excellency will excuse—the fact

is, I have so rarely any visitors that the poor woman does not understand her duty in such matters. Really I am so covered with confusion,"—she continued, putting up her delicate little hand with a feeble sort of little attempt to draw her dress a little more together across her throat. "I cannot forgive her! She has exposed me to seem wanting in respect towards your Excellency; I will dismiss her from my service!"

"Let me intercede for her, poor woman!" said the Marchese, advancing into the room; "indeed it was mainly my fault, I ought to have asked if you were visible."

"One word from *la sua Signoria* is enough. If you can forgive me, I must forgive her! But you will own, Signor Marchese, that it is—what shall I say—?" She hesitated and cast her eyes down with a bewitching smile and a little movement of her head to one side,—"that it really is—embarrassing! Such a thing never happened to me before!"

"But now it has happened, Signora," said the Marchese, emboldened by the smile, and by a shy sidelong glance, which she shot from under her eyelashes with a laugh in her eyes, as she spoke;—"now it has happened that I have been permitted to

see you in a toilet all the more exquisitely charming in that it wants the formality of the costume in which the world is wont to see you,—may I not say what I came for the purpose of saying?"

"Will you be very discreet, Signor?" she said, putting a slender rosy finger up to her smiling lips; "and never, never let it be known to any human being, that I ever received you save in the fullest of full dress, as would become me in receiving the honour of a visit from your Excellency!"

"Not a syllable, not a whisper!" replied the Marchese, taking her tone, and putting his own finger on his lips. "And then, I may say, Signora, that in Ravenna a visit at any hour from old Lamberto di Castelmare would do your fair name no harm!" he added, taking the arm-chair by the side of the sofa to which she pointed, as she resumed her former place and attitude on the couch.

"I dare say it might not, if I am to judge of his position in the society from your own, Signor Marchese. But I did not know, that there was any old Signor Lamberto di Castelmare. I supposed you were the head of the family,—your uncle, perhaps?" said Bianca, very innocently.

"I have no uncle, Signora! I am the oldest Castelmare extant," said the Marchese.

"And you call yourself *old* Lamberto, Marchese! Why I would wager my pearl necklace,—and that is the most valuable possession I have—against a daisy chain, that you are not ten years older than I am. I shall be called old Bianca Lalli next, at that rate!"

"And how many years, since you are ready to wager on it,—have gone to the bringing the face and form I see before me to their matchless perfection?" said the Marchese.

"Who was ever before so prettily asked how old she was?" said Bianca, suffering her large blue eyes to rest fully on the Marchese's face for an instant, and then dropping them with an air of conscious embarrassment. "Well, a frank question deserves—or at least shall have—a frank answer! I shall never see my twenty-fourth birthday again?"

"And you judge me then to be thirty-four!" said the Marchese, looking at her laughingly.

"Certainly I don't think any room full of strangers would judge you to be more than that," replied Bianca, looking at him seriously.

"Ta!—ta!—ta! Add fifteen years to that; and

you will be nearer the mark. So you see, *bella Signora*, that you may safely trust yourself to a *tête-à-tête* with me under any circumstances."

"Ta!—ta!—ta!" said Bianca, repeating his own phrase, with a merry laugh in her eyes, and shaking her rich auburn curls at him. "It seems impossible, utterly incredible! But I am very glad if it is so,—very glad. There is nothing so intolerable to me as the young lads who come buzzing about one circumstanced as I am, and whom it is as difficult to drive away as it is to drive away flies in summer. There is no trusting to them; they would compromise a poor girl as soon as look at her, if she was fool enough to let them. And I have had lessons in the necessity of caution, Signor Marchese. I have been cruelly treated,—very cruelly calumniated!" And Bianca, knowing, it is to be supposed, that, if it is not always the case that "Beauty's tear is lovelier than her smile," as the poet says, yet that it is a phase of beauty often more potent over a male heart than the sunniest smile, raised a corner of her daintily-embroidered handkerchief to her eyes.

The Marchese was an old man of the world,—as the cynical phrase goes,—and of what a world?—an old Italian Marchese of the beginning of the nine-

teenth century,—a period when, if crime was less rife than in former and stronger ages, morality was never at a lower ebb. He was a man whose musical tastes had made him conversant with the Divas of the stage, and familiar with the interior aspects of Italian theatrical life;—one, too, whom circumstances had caused to become specially well acquainted with the antecedent history of this particular Diva now stretched on the sofa before him. Yet none the less for all this did "beauty's tear," enhanced by beauty's laced pocket-handkerchief, exercise on him its usual glamour.

Calumniated!—that lovely creature of matchless purity before him,—matchless purity! so white was her throat; so round and slender her waist; so daintily snowy her muslin drapery. Calumny! Of course it was calumny. And how he could have poignarded the calumniators, and taken the poor, fluttering, persecuted Diva to his bosom. The desire to execute that latter portion of retributive and poetical justice was making itself felt stronger and stronger within him every minute, as he sat beside the sofa exposed to the full force of the magnetic poison-current which was intoxicating him.

"Signora—" he said, putting his hand out to take

hers, which she readily gave him. His own hand shook, and he paused in his speech, overcome for a moment by a sort of dizziness and a sudden rush of the blood to his brow and eyes,—a veritable electric shock caused by the contact of her hand with his.

"Signora," he continued, recovering himself, "no such slander—no such insults will follow you here; none such *shall* follow you here. Lamberto di Castelmare can, at least in Ravenna, promise you that much. Nor if they did follow you, would such stories here be believed."

"Generous! Just!" murmured Bianca behind the laced pocket-handkerchief in a broken voice, just loud enough to reach the neighbouring ear of the Marchese, while she suffered her slender fingers to press the hand which held hers just perceptibly before withdrawing it from him;—"just," she continued in a louder tone, taking her handkerchief from her face, and raising her shoulders a little from the sofa, so as to turn more fully towards him, while her eyes fired point blank into his a broadside of uncontrollable gratitude and admiration; — "just, because generous and noble. Oh, Signor Marchese, those who have never known what it is to suffer from

a slanderous tongue can never know the delight—the sweet consolation of meeting with such generous appreciation."

The poor Diva was quite overcome by her own emotion; and, sinking back on the cushions of the sofa, again lifted her handkerchief to her face, while one or two half-stifled sobs showed how deeply she had been moved;—and how perfect was the form and hue of the beautiful half-covered bosom which this emotion caused to heave beneath its gauzy veil.

Just at that minute there came, to the infinite disgust of the Marchese, a discreet tap at the door.

Bianca rapidly passed her fingers over the tresses above her forehead, resettled her *pose* on the sofa, and gave the Marchese a meaning look of common intelligence and mutual confidence, which set forth, as well as a volume could have done, and established the fact that there existed thenceforward a bond of union and a fellowship between her and him, such as shut them in together, and shut out in the cold all the rest of Ravenna, and then said "*Passi*," and admitted, as she knew very well, no more startling an interrupter than Gigia.

The well-trained servant said nothing and looked

at nothing; but silently handed to her mistress two cards.

"Of course you told these gentlemen that I was not visible, Gigia?"

"*Diamine!* Signora; of course I should not have let any gentleman pass this morning more than any other morning of the year if you had not specially told me to admit the Marchese Lamberto at any hour he might come," said Gigia with a *niaise* simplicity, as she left the room.

Bianca covered her face with her pretty hands and shook a gale of perfume from her sunny locks, as she exclaimed, *sotto voce*,—

"Oh, the stupidity of these servants! Signor Marchese," she continued, looking up shyly, but with a gay laugh in her eyes, "what must you not imagine?—not, at all events, I hope, that I contemplated the possibility of receiving you in this dishabille? But I will do as other criminals do;—confess when they are found out. I did think," she continued, casting down her eyes, and hesitating with the most charmingly becoming and naïve confusion;—"I had some little hope—no; I don't mean that;—I did not mean to put that into my confession;—it did occur to me as possible," she

went on, hanging her pretty head, and playing nervously with the folds of her dress in a manner which had the accidental effect of causing it to leave uncovered an additional inch of silk stocking—"it did occur to me as possible that the Marchese Lamberto might come to me sooner than the time named for the meeting with the *impresario;* — for the sake of giving me any hints that his perfect knowledge of the subject might suggest; and I fully intended to be dressed and ready to receive him if he should show me any such condescending kindness—and so told my maid to make an exception in his case to my invariable rule! And then the minutes slipped away; and I fell into a reverie, thinking—thinking—thinking; and then, all of a sudden, before I knew that there was any one in the room—— if you think of the devil—and I suppose it is equally true if you think of an angel;—but there, again, that was not intended to be any part of my confession. I think I shall give up confession, at all events, to you, Signor Marchese, for the future. But now I have confessed myself this time, and told the whole, whole truth—may I hope for absolution?"

There was an adorable mixture of candour, and

gaiety of heart, and child-like simplicity in the beautiful features as she looked up into his face when she finished speaking, together with an expression of appealing confidence and almost tenderness in the eyes that achieved the final and complete subjugation of the Marchese.

Again he took her hand, and again his head swam round with the violence of the emotion caused by the contact of palm with palm, as he said,—

"Ah, Signora, if I were equally candid perhaps it would turn out that it was for me to confess, and for you to grant absolution—if you could. Do you think you could?" he said, raising her hand to his lips as he said the words.

"Ha! Signor Marchese, that would quite depend upon the nature of the confession. When I have heard it I will do my best to be an indulgent confessor. But, however curious I may be to hear you in the confessional, it must not be now; or I shall really not be ready to receive Signor Stadione. Heavens! It wants only ten minutes to one now. I must run and dress as quickly as I possibly can. To think that almost an hour should have run away since you came here; and it seems like ten minutes. May I beg your indulgence, Signor Marchese, if I

ask you to wait for me while I dress? I will be as quick as I possibly can."

"On no account hurry yourself, Signora. It is my fault for having detained you. And if I had to wait ten hours instead of one, would not the one I have passed be cheaply purchased? Never mind Stadione; I will explain to him that you are dressing——"

"And that you have been made to wait some time already by my abominable unpunctuality," said Bianca, holding up one fore-finger and giving him a look of mutual intelligence.

"Of course—of course. *A chi lo dite!*" returned the Marchese, giving her once more his hand to help her to rise from the sofa.

As she did so she put into his hand, without any word of comment, but with a slight smile and a little momentary raising of her eyebrows, the two cards that Gigia had, a little while before, handed to her. They bore the names of the Barone Manutoli and the Marchese Ludovico Castelmare; and Bianca handed them to the Marchese with a matter-of-course air that seemed to say that, in the position which the Marchese Lamberto and she had assumed towards each other, it was natural and proper that he should see who had called on her.

He merely nodded as he looked at them; and then, for the second time, kissing the tips of the fingers he still held, as she got up from her couch, he bowed low as she passed him to go towards the bedroom; and she, before quitting the room, made a sweeping curtsey, half playfully, and then kissed the tops of her fingers to him as she vanished into the inner room.

CHAPTER V.

AFTER-THOUGHTS.

THE Marchese Lamberto and Signor Ercole Stadione quitted the house in which the *prima donna* had her lodging, together, when the business matters, which they had come thither to arrange, had been settled.

"A wonderful woman, Signor Marchese," said the little *impresario*, trotting along with short steps by the side of the Marchese, and rising on his toes in a springy manner, that made his walk resemble that of a cock-sparrow. "Truly a wonderful woman. I have seen and known a many in my day, Signor Marchese, as you are well aware, sir; but such an one as that, such an out-and-outer, I never saw before."

"She is evidently a lady, whose education and manners entitle her to be treated with all respect," replied the Marchese, more drily, the little man thought, than his great patron was usually in the

habit of addressing him, and somewhat quickening his stride at the same time, as if he wanted to walk away from the *impresario*.

"Most undoubtedly, Signor Marchese, and every sort of respectful treatment she shall have. There shall be a stove and a new looking-glass put into her dressing-room this very day. If she don't draw, say Ercole Stadione knows nothing about it. A very singular thing it is, Signor Marchese,—and you must have observed it, Signor, as well as I,—there's some women whose singing, let 'em sing as well as they will, is the smallest part of their value in filling a theatre. There's no saying what it is, but they draw —Lord bless you, as a bit of salt will draw the cattle after it! And this Lalli is one of that sort. I know 'em, when I see 'em. Won't she draw, that's all!" said the little man again, rubbing his hands together, and chuckling with infinite glee.

The Marchese Lamberto would have been at a loss probably if he had been required to state clearly why he felt angry and annoyed with the *impresario* that morning, and thought him a bore, and wished to be quit of him. But such was the case. And presently, when the well-skilled and business-like little man began to canvass the capabilities of certain

parts in his *repertorio*, for the most advantageous showing off of the personal advantages of the new acquisition, the Marchese could stand it no longer, but replied hastily:

"Well, well. All these matters had better be submitted to the lady herself. I think, Signor Ercole, that I will say good-morning now. You are going to the theatre, and I am waited for at the palazzo."

And the Marchese did return to the palazzo, though nobody was specially waiting for him there. On the contrary, he told the servant in the hall to admit nobody, and when he reached his library, he shut the door and bolted it. And then he threw himself into an easy chair to think.

The first thing that his thinking made clear and certain to him was that something had happened, or was happening to him, which had never happened to him before,—something respecting the exact nature of which all his previous experience afforded him no light.

In love! He had never been in love; but he knew, with some tolerable accuracy, what was generally understood by the phrase. He had read the poets, who describe the passion under sufficiently various phases; and he had heard plenty of lovers'

talk among a people who are not wont to suffer, or to exult, or to be happy in silence. Was he in love with this woman? Did he, in his heart, love her—in his heart, as he was there in the solitude of his own room, at liberty and at leisure to examine his heart upon the subject. A heavy frown settled on the Marchese Lamberto's brow, and an unpleasant change came over his face, as he proceeded with the task of asking his heart this question. There rose up feelings and promptings within him, which almost drove him to the fierce assertion to himself that he hated this woman, who was thus occupying his thoughts against his will.

What had become of all that warm chivalry of feeling that had urged him, with all perfect earnestness of sincerity, to declare that no breath of calumny or insult should come near her, beneath the ægis that he could and would throw over her? Where was it gone? All clean gone. He knew, with tolerable accuracy, the story of the former life of this woman. They were facts which he knew,—certainly knew. But they had all vanished from his mind,—had been as though they were not,—while he had sat there by her sofa, looking at her and listening to her,—had all vanished, even as the ardent chivalry, which had then

been caused by some sorcery to spring up in his mind, had vanished now.

It was passing strange.

That he was very sorely tempted—as he had never before in his life been tempted—to make love to this actress,—as it is called,—to make love to her after the fashion, not so much of those poetical descriptions which have been referred to, as after the fashion of those prosaic settings-forth of the passion, which were familiar enough to his ears, was clearly recognizable by him. He knew very certainly that he desired that.

And was what he desired so much out of his reach? Surely all that had happened, all that he had seen, all that he had heard at the interview with Bianca that morning, was not calculated to lead him to think so. And why should it be? It would be all very much according to the ordinary current of events in such matters. He was a bachelor. He was wealthy. He was the most prominent noble of the city. He was brought specially into contact with the lady by his theatrical connection and habitudes. His patronage and protection were by far the most valuable that could be offered to her in Ravenna. The Diva herself was—such as Divas of her sort and time were wont to be.

It would seem to be all very easy and straightforward. What was the worst penalty wont to follow from such peccadilloes to persons in his position? The loss of a little money,—of a good deal of money perhaps. But he had plenty and to spare.

But none of these considerations availed to smooth the frown from the Marchese's brow, or to make the future at all seem clear before him.

In the first place to make this singer his mistress, simple and little objectionable as such a step might seem to most men of his country, and rank, and period, and freedom from ties, was not an easy matter, or an agreeable prospect to the Marchese, on purely social considerations. He had placed himself on a special pedestal, from which such a liaison would involve a fall. And such a fall, or the danger of such a fall, was very dreadful to the Marchese. There was the Cardinal; there were the good nuns, whose affairs he managed, and who looked on him as a saint on earth. Worst of all there was his nephew. How preach to him (terribly necessary as such preaching might be) under such circumstances?

To be sure, there was no need of doing whatever he might do in such sort that the whole town should be his confidant. He had as good opportunities for

secrecy as could be desired. Theatrical business and his recognized connection with it was an abundant and unsuspected excuse for as much conversation with the lady,—as many interviews as he might wish. It seemed safe enough upon the whole.

And yet these considerations did not avail to take the frown from the Marchese's brow, or bring his perplexed self-examination to an end. The very evident disposition of the lady to be kind did not avail to please him. Instead of being pleased and triumphant at the probable prospect of so enviable a *bonne fortune*, he was displeased, unhappy, irritated, angry—angry with himself and with the sorceress who had thrown this spell on him. How was it? By what charm had she bewitched him so? Already he was impatient, longing to be back again in her presence. And yet he was angry with her,—doubted whether he did not rather hate her than love her.

At last he started from his chair and swore that he would retain the mastery over his own self; that he would think no more of the abominable woman,—see her no more!

Taking his hat he rushed out of the house, with an instinctive desire for bodily movement as a means of stilling the tossing fever that was raging within

him; walked through the streets at such an unusual pace, that the people turned round to look after him as he passed; walked by the door of the house in the Via di Santa Eufemia in which Paolina lived,—saw Ludovico coming from it, who was surprised indeed at thus seeing his uncle; and more surprised still to find, that the Marchese passed him without seeming to notice him,—walked out into the country, and returned only at supper-time, tired and worn out; and then, when the supper was over, and Ludovico had gone out to the Circolo as usual, after pacing his room, and swearing to himself at every turn, that he would see the creature no more,—slunk out of his own palazzo, feeling afraid of being seen by his own servants, and wandered to her lodging!

And what were Bianca's meditations, when the business visit of the *impresario* was over, and he and the Marchese left her room together?

First and foremost, the Marchese Lamberto was in love with her; and that not as dozens of youngsters in many a city had been; but madly, desperately, in love with her. That fact admitted of no doubt whatever! It was strange, curious enough, that she should have succeeded so brilliantly, so entirely, and so immediately in spite of all the signs

and tokens which had led her not small experience to expect so entirely different a result. Clearly the still larger experience of old Quinto Lalli had been more far-sighted. His view of the matter had been the true one!

But still, how far was his view of the question a correct one? What was the success, which had been very unmistakably so far achieved, in reality worth? It was very plain that this Marchese Lamberto had been caught, captivated, fascinated! But what then? There was no doubt at all that he would very willingly suffer her to add him to the list of her previous admirers and lovers. It never entered into the Diva's head to conceive, after the very unmistakable testimony she had received of the evident admiration of the Marchese, that very grave difficulties, objections, and hesitations would, on his side, stand in the way of his accepting any such position. She doubted not that this conquest was perfectly within her reach; and that there would be no difficulty at all in drawing large supplies from the Castelmare wealth towards recruiting the needs of the Lalli exchequer.

But this, as has been explained, was not what Bianca wanted. "Major rerum *sibi* nascitur ordo!"

She was intent on playing a higher and greater game. Was it likely she would be able so to fix the harpoon she had successfully thrown in the very vitals of the prey, so to make this man feel that she was absolutely essential to his happiness, as to induce him to marry her? That was the question! And Bianca did not delude herself into imagining that anything that had passed between herself and the Marchese that morning entitled her to consider the battle which should lead to that victory as even begun.

The Diva did not conceal from herself the greatness and arduous nature of the task before her. She knew what a Marchese of mature age, of noble lineage, and of unblemished reputation, was; and she knew what she was. But she did not appreciate those extra difficulties in the case, which arose from the special social position, and still more from the special character and temperament of the man,—and these were the greatest difficulties of all!

On the whole, she was sanguine; and what was perhaps more to the purpose, old Quinto, when they talked the matter over together, and the general result of the morning interview had been reported to him, was sanguine too.

"Depend upon it, *bambina mia*," he said, "it is the best game—the real game. Young fry will rise to the bait more readily; but they also wriggle off the hook much more easily. It is the old fish who, when he has it once fixed in his gills, cannot get rid of it, struggle as he may. You play your game well, —neither relaxing, nor yet too much in a hurry, and I prophesy that I shall live to see you Marchesa di Castelmare."

"And many a year afterwards, I hope, *papa mio*. And you may depend on my teaching my husband to behave like a good son-in-law," said Bianca, with a bright laugh.

"As for the nephew," continued Quinto, "I can understand that it would be more agreeable to make your attack on him——"

"I don't know that at all, *papa mio*," interrupted Bianca. "You may laugh, if you will, and think that I am making a virtue of necessity—and small blame to me if I were—but the truth is, I do like the Marchese. I like him better, as far as I can yet tell, than any man I ever knew. Yes! you may make grimaces, and look as wicked as you please! But it is true. And, if you ever do see me Marchesa di Castelmare, you will see that I shall

make him a very good, ay, and a very fond, wife."

"Who could doubt it, Signora, that has the advantage of knowing you as well as I do?" said the old man, with a mocking bow.

"You may sneer as much as you like, Quinto; but you understand nothing about it. The Marchese is a man any woman might love. You call him an old man? I tell you he is younger for a man than I am for a woman, God help me! It isn't only years that make people old."

"That's true, *bambina mia, poveretta*. And I am sure I have nothing to say against it if you can fancy this Marchese a gay and handsome young cavalier."

"Handsome he is, as far as that goes. I swear he is the handsomest man I have seen here! His nephew is good-looking enough, but he is not to be compared to his uncle either in face or person."

"Well, whether you have succeeded or not in making the Marchese in love with you, *cara mia*, I begin to think that you have succeeded already in falling in love with him," said Quinto, looking at her with raised eyebrows.

Bianca remained silent awhile, nodding her head

up and down in a sort of reverie, and then said, rousing herself with a shake of her flowing curls as she looked up, "No; not quite that. But I won't say that it is impossible that if I am to make him love me, I may come to love him in the doing of it. You see, *amico mio*, it is something new. It is not the old weary mill-round. He did not come to me with the set purpose of making love to me, as all those young fellows have done, and do, just because they have nothing else to amuse them; because it's the fashion; because it's a feather in their caps; because it's the thing to have a *prima donna* for their mistress! If the Marchese has fallen, or falls, in love with me, he does so because he cannot help himself,—he does it in despite of himself; and that flatters a woman, Quinto. Well, we shall see," she added, after another pause: "one thing, at all events. I swear that there shall be nothing between me and the Marchese—of—the old sort."

"It is wisely said, *bambina mia*. That is the road which must lead, if any can, to the winning of your game."

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE CIRCOLO.

THERE was, at all events, one man at Ravenna who was entirely pleased and satisfied with the famous *prima donna* in all respects: and this was Signor Ercole Stadione.

The Carnival campaign of La Lalli had been thus far brilliantly successful, and the Carnival was now about half over. She "drew," as the little *impresario* had prophesied she would, to his heart's content. It was many a year since there had been so successful a season at the theatre. Each part she sang in was a more brilliant success than the last; and the public enthusiasm was such as enthusiasm on such subjects never is save in Italy.

In every respect, too, her ways and behaviour had been unexceptional. Her attention was never distracted from her business by the visits of young

men behind the scenes—a torment which, during the reigns of other Divas, had often driven the poor little *impresario*, who dared not get rid of such intruders as he would have liked to do, almost wild. Bianca would permit no visits of the kind. She had never behaved herself to any of the young men in such sort as to cause any of those rivalries and jealousies which are sometimes apt to manifest themselves in hostile partisanship, when the Diva is on the boards —another fruitful source of trouble to much-tried *impresarios*.

She had walked circumspectly and prudently in all respects—a most moral and highly satisfactory Diva.

She was understood to receive no visitors at home—at least, none of a compromising kind. The Marchese Lamberto was often with her: of course, naturally! He was well known to be always a sort of second amateur manager: neither the theatre nor little Ercole Stadione could go on without him. And then the Marchese Lamberto was—the Marchese Lamberto! If he had chosen to sit by the bedside of any *prima donna* in Italy night after night, it would only have been supposed that he was giving her possets for the improvement of her voice.

Occasionally, also, she would receive the visits of

the Marchese Ludovico; evidently by reason of the unavoidable intimacy of his uncle in the house. And Ludovico reported to them all at the Circolo that she was a most charming woman indeed—full of talent, merry as a young girl, companionable, and fond of society, but wholly devoted to her art, and quite inaccessible in the way of love-making. He assured the *jeunesse dorée* of Ravenna that they lost nothing in any such point of view by their exclusion from her intimacy, for that all their enterprises in that line would be quite thrown away.

The Conte Leandro Lombardoni, indeed, always carried about with him in his breast-pocket, a carefully preserved little letter on pink notepaper, which he gave the world to understand was part of a correspondence carried on between him (reconciled as he was to the *bel sesso*) and the Diva; and had more than once contrived to be seen hanging about the door of her house at hours when honest Divas, as well as mortals, ought to be in bed and asleep. But nobody believed him, or imagined that anything save a bad cold was at all likely to result from his vigils beneath the cold stars. He showed, indeed, with many mysterious precautions against the remainder of the letter being seen, that the little pink sheet

of notepaper did indeed bear the signature of "Bianca Lalli." But when one of the ingenuous youth picked his pocket of it, it was found to be a very coldly courteous acknowledgment of a copy of verses, which the Diva promised to read as soon as her avocations would permit her to do so!

"Any way," said the discomfited poet, "that is more than any of you others have got. And it's not so small a matter, when you come to think of it!"

"*Per Bacco*, no! Leandro is in the right of it!" said the young Conte Beppo Farini; "a small matter to find somebody who promises even to read his verses! I should think not, indeed! Where will you find another to do as much?"

"*Riconciliato col bel sesso!* I should think you were, indeed!" cried another; "she absolutely thanks you for sending her your rhymes! Nobody ever did as much as that before, Leandro mio! No wonder you haunt the street before her door!"

"I don't haunt the street before her door. Envy, Jealousy, ye green-eyed and loathsome monsters, how miserably small and mean can ye make the hearts of men!" said Leandro, lifting up hands and eyes.

"Bravo, Leandro, bravo! get upon the table, man!" cried Farini.

"Get home to bed, rather. It is too bad, because no human being will read his poetry, he takes to spouting it!" said the other.

"Let us look what she says," cried Ludovico di Castelmare; putting out his hand to take the little note. "Upon my word she writes a pretty hand. It is a very neatly expressed note."

"Oh, you can see that much, can you?" returned Leandro. "I should think it was too! Is there any one of you here can show such a note from any woman, let her be who she may? She says she will read the poem I have been good enough to send her—good enough to send her, mark that!—as soon as she can find time to do so! What could she say more, I should like to know? Of course she is occupied. It stands to reason. But she will read my poem; and then you will see!"

"Ay, then we shall see our little Leandro duly appreciated at last!" said the Barone Manutoli. "As soon as the Diva has found time to read the poem there will come another little pink note, adorably perfumed: he will be summoned to her august presence, and installed as her poet in

ordinary, and who knows what else besides,—her Magnus Apollo? It is a pity there are not eight other *prime donne* to make up the sacred number. Then we should see our Leandro in his true position and vocation. Give me a sheet of paper, and I will show you a new presentation of Apollo and the Muses. They are all presenting him with *pasticcerie* and *bonbons*. He has one hand on the lyre, and the other on his stomach, for the homage of the goddesses has made him somewhat sick; his eyes, you observe, are cast heavenwards, partly by reason of poetic inspiration, and partly by reason of nausea!"

"Bravo! bravo, Manutoli!" cried a chorus of voices.

"Envy and jealousy, envy and jealousy, all envy and jealousy. It is pitiable to see what they can reduce men to," cried the poet, foaming at the mouth.

"Never mind them, Leandro mio—never mind them. It is the universal penalty of true merit, you know; the same thing all the world over," said Ludovico.

"But, I say, Ludovico," rejoined Manutoli, "in the meantime, till our Leandro's poem shall have been read and duly appreciated, you are the only one

who has been admitted to the privacy of La Lalli. What is your report to us Gentiles of the outer court? Is she really so unapproachable? And is she as adorable behind the scenes as before them?"

"Well, you ought to be able to answer that question yourself, Manutoli," replied Ludovico; "you were with *lo zio* and me that day when we went out to meet her; I am sure you had a fair look at her then."

"A look? Yes; and I looked all I could look. I saw a charming face, younger and fresher looking than might have been expected from the length of time she has been on the boards,—a very pretty figure, as far as her travelling-dress would show it one; and the loveliest foot and ankle I ever saw in my life. I could swear to that again at any time. Don't you remember how she stood with her foot down on the step, when she was getting out of the carriage. I thought at the time that she knew what she was about very well."

"Of course she did. Do you think they don't always know very well, every one of them, off the stage or on the stage?" said Farini.

"But I want to know what sort of body she is?" returned Manutoli; "I don't need to be told that she

is a very lovely woman; but of what sort is she? Why does she keep us all at a distance? What is her game?"

"Upon my life I don't know," answered Ludovico, "unless it's a devouring passion for Leandro. I protest I have no reason to think she cares a button for anything but her own art. I never tried; but it's my impression that if I had ever whispered a word in her ear I should have got a flea in my own for my pains."

"You don't want to make us believe that you have been seeing her frequently all this time,—passing hours with her *a quattro occhi*, and have never made love to her, Ludovico?" said Farini.

"No; I don't want to make you believe it, for I don't care a straw whether you believe it or not; but it is the fact for all that," returned Ludovico.

"Ludovico has enough on his hands in another quarter. What would they say about it in the Via Santa Eufemia if he were to bow down to new and strange goddesses?" said Manutoli.

"That, if you please, Manutoli, we will not discuss either now or at any other time," said Ludovico, with a look that showed he was in earnest. "But, as for *La Diva Bianca*, I have no objection to

tell all I know to anybody. My belief is that she is as correct and proper, and all that sort of thing, as a Vestal."

"*Che!*"

"*Che!*"

"*Che!*"

A chorus of protestations of incredulity in every tone of the gamut met the monstrous assertion.

"What, after all we heard of her doings at Milan—after all the histories of her goddess-ship in every city of Italy?" said Manutoli.

"Well, what did we hear of her doings at Milan? The fact is, we know nothing about the matter; and as to her previous history—of course I don't suppose that she is, and always has been, a Diana; but it may be that she has come to the time when she has thought it well to turn over a new leaf. Such times do come to such women; but all I know is, that I firmly believe that since she has been here she has lived the life of a nun," said Ludovico, in the simple tone of a man who is stating a truth which he has no interest in causing his hearers to credit or discredit.

"*Per Bacco*, it's queer!" said Farini, slapping his hand against his thigh. "I *have* heard," he

continued in the tone of one speaking of some strange and almost incredible monstrosity,—"I *have heard* of such women taking a turn to *devozione*. It's not that with La Lalli, is it?"

"*Che!* Nothing of the sort; she is as full of frolic as a kitten—up to any fun. And she is a very clever woman, too, let me tell you—a good deal of education. If you will put making love to her out of your head, I never knew a woman who was pleasanter company," said Ludovico.

"And you really mean that you have never tried to make love to her in any way?" reiterated Manutoli.

"I do mean it, upon my soul; but I don't care a rap whether you believe it or not," rejoined Ludovico.

"And you are with her very frequently?" persisted Manutoli.

"Yes; I have seen a good deal of her altogether. I like her; and I fancy she likes me to go there; she seems to wish me to come. Perhaps it is a novelty to her to have a man about her who doesn't try to make love to her."

"The Marchese Lamberto sees her a good deal?"

"Yes, naturally. If it had not been for that I should probably never have made acquaintance with her at all. *Lo zio* is continually there. He ought to have been an *impresario*. In fact, he is the real *impresario*. Little Ercole only does what my uncle tells him. I don't believe she ever sings a note on the stage that he has not heard and approved beforehand."

"Suppose he is the dark horse; suppose she is his mistress all this time; and he takes care to keep her all to himself," said Manutoli.

"What, *lo zio*. Bah! I should have thought that you knew him better than that, Manutoli. To him a woman is a voice, and nothing else. If the same sounds could be got out of a flute or a fiddle he would like it much better, and think it far more convenient. I don't think my uncle Lamberto ever knew whether a woman was pretty or plain. I wish to heaven he would get caught for once in his life; it would suit my book very well. He would have less leisure to think of—other things."

The fact was that the Marchese had, in truth, had less leisure to think of those other things from which Ludovico desired that his attention should be drawn away. His visits to the Via Santa

Eufemia had been more frequent than ever; his visits to the Marchesa Anna Lanfredi and her niece rarer than ever. And he had received neither lectures nor remonstrances for a long time past. In truth, the Marchese had his mind too full of other matters to think much of his nephew's affairs or doings. And, besides that, there was a quite new and hitherto unknown feeling in the heart of the Marchese Lamberto which made him shrink from any such encounter with his nephew, as remonstrances respecting his conduct with regard to Paolina would have occasioned;—a feeling which made it seem to him that he was the watched instead of the watcher; —that suggested to him the fear that the first word he might utter upon the subject would be met by references to doings of his own.

An utterly unfounded fear. But so it is that conscience doth make cowards of us all.

CHAPTER VII.

EXTREMES MEET.

The Marchese was uneasy in the presence of his nephew. But the fact was that he was uneasy and unhappy altogether, and at all times. From being one of the most placidly cheerful and contented of men, he was becoming nervous, anxious, and restless. People began to remark that the Marchese was beginning to look older. They had said for years past that he had not grown a day older in the last ten years. But this winter there was a change in him!

It did not occur to anybody to connect any change that was observable either in the Marchese's manner or in his appearance, with the frequency of his visits to the *quartiere* inhabited by the *prima donna* and Signor Quinto Lalli, in the Strada di Porta Sisi. The ordinary habits of the Marchese,

and his functions as a patron of the theatre and amateur *impresario* were so well known and understood, that it seemed perfectly natural to all Ravenna that he should be very frequently with the *prima donna*. And on the other hand, the almost monastic regularity of his life, and his character of long standing in such respects, would have made the notion that he had any idea of flirting with the singer appear utterly absurd and inadmissible to every man, woman, or child in the city, if it had ever come into anybody's head.

The fact was, however, that the Marchese was much oftener in the Strada di Porta Sisi than anybody guessed. Besides the morning visits, which were patent to all the world, who chose to take heed of them, the Marchese very frequently spent those evenings there, when the "Diva" did not sing; slinking out of the Palazzo Castelmare, and taking all sorts of precautions to prevent any human being—nephew, servants, friends, or strangers—from guessing the secret of these nocturnal walks.

Such precautions were very needless; if anybody had noticed the Marchese Lamberto passing under the shadow of the eaves in any part of the city after nightfall, it would only have been supposed that he

was bound on some mission of beneficence, or good work of some sort! And if even it had become known to a few persons given to prying into what did not concern them, that the Marchese Lamberto di Castelmare was not more immaculate in his conduct than his neighbours, the only result would have been a few jests which he would have never heard, and a few sly smiles which he would have never seen.

But the Marchese could not look at the matter in this light. He felt as if his fall from the social eminence on which he stood would have been as a moral earthquake in Ravenna. The idea that such jests and such smiles could exist, however unseen and unheard, would have been intolerable to him. And the Marchese was, accordingly, a miserable man.

A miserable man, and he could not help himself! Each time that he quitted the siren, the chain that bound him was drawn more tightly around him. At each visit he drank deep draughts of the philtre, that was poisoning the fountains of his life. Again and again he had made a violent struggle to throw off the enchantment and be free. And again and again the effort had been too great for his strength, and he had returned like the scorched moth, which comes back

again and again to the fatal brightness, till it perishes in it.

In his hours of solitary self-examination he loathed and mocked himself to scorn! He, Lamberto di Castelmare, to risk and to feel humiliation, and to suffer for the love of a woman, whose light affections had been given to so many! He, who had been smiled on by many a high-born beauty in vain! Love! did he love her? Again and again he told himself that what he felt for her was far more akin to hate. He marvelled; he could not comprehend himself! He was often inclined to believe that the old tales of philtres and of witchery were not all false, and that he was in truth bewitched; and he struggled angrily against the spell, and at such times hated the beauty that had tangled him in it!

And in all this time Bianca had not yet ventured to show clearly her real game. Nor had it yet occurred to the Marchese that such a preposterous thought as that he could marry her could have entered into her mind. Yet it was clear to him that he made no progress towards making her his own upon any other terms. The alternations between beckoning him on and warding him off had been managed with such skill, that they appeared to be

the result of the Diva's internal struggle with her own inclinations. What was he to understand by it? If she had been,—had always been—of unblemished character! But it was not so; he knew better!

That her conduct at Ravenna had been correct was undeniable. Still, even with regard to that, the Marchese was not spared the pangs of jealousy, in addition to all the rest. Ludovico continued to frequent the house in the Strada di Porta Sisi. It seemed, as he had said at the Circolo, as if Bianca wished him to come there. In fact he had spoken to the young men at the Circolo with perfect truth in all respects as to his relations with the Diva. There had never been any word of love-making or even flirting between them. Yet, in a sort of way, she seemed to wish to be agreeable to him and to attract him. But she never made any secret of his visits from the Marchese, although it was unmistakable enough that it was disagreeable to him to hear of them.

Had he been free from the spell himself he would have rather rejoiced that his nephew had met with an attraction, which would be likely to have the effect of making him faithless to Paolina. As it was, it was an additional source of irritation to the

Marchese,—another drop of gall in his cup, to hear it constantly mentioned by Bianca in the most innocent way in the world, that Ludovico had been here with her, or there with her, or passing the morning with her!

It was drawing towards the end of the Carnival, which the late fall of Easter had made rather a long one that year, when, on one Saturday night, Bianca sat by her own fireside, expecting a visit from the Marchese. She doubted not that he would come, though no special appointment on the subject had been made between them. There were few "off evenings" now, that he did not spend with her. Saturday in most of the cities of Italy is, or was, an off-night at the theatre, being the vigil of the Sunday feast-day. The ecclesiastical proprieties are less attended to now in matters theatrical, as in other matters in Italy. But Saturday used, in ante-revolutionary times, to be an evening on which actors and actresses and their friends could always reckon for a holiday.

Bianca was sitting, exquisitely dressed, it need hardly be said, in a style which combined with inimitable skill all the requirements of the most strict propriety with perfect adaptation to the objects

of showing off every beauty of face, hair, hand, figure, foot to the utmost, and attracting her expected visitor as irresistibly as possible.

Quinto Lalli had been sent to enjoy himself at the Café, with stringent directions not to return before he should have ascertained that the Marchese had left the house, let the hour be as late as it might.

Bianca meditated deeply, while she waited her lover's coming.

Her lover ! yes, there was no doubt about that. Bianca had felt perfectly assured that she was justified in considering the Marchese as such on that first morning, when he had come to her an hour in advance of the time appointed for his visit in company with the *impresario*. But it was high time that some better understanding of the footing on which they stood as regarded each other should be arrived at.

Hitherto no direct proposals of any kind had been made to her by the Marchese. He was not good at any such work. Any one of those distinguished sons of paternal governments, who had constituted the material of Bianca's experiences of that division of mankind, would have long since said what he

wanted, and have very clearly indicated the terms on which he was willing to become the fortunate possessor of the coveted article. And Bianca would have perfectly well known how, under the present circumstances, to answer any such proposals, as she had known under the other circumstances of past days. But the Marchese made no proposals. What he wished, indeed, was abundantly clear to her. But his mode of making it clear rendered the task of dealing with him a somewhat difficult one.

Partially, Bianca understood the nature of the case. She was partly aware why the Marchese was slow to say that which so many, whom she had known, had made so little difficulty of saying. She understood that, whatever his years might be, he was a novice at that business. She comprehended that he was, in many respects, a younger man than many a coulisse-frequenting youth whom she had known. But she was far from conceiving any true notion of the Marchese's state of mind on the subject. She was very far from imagining that he looked with disgust and with terror at the position which she conceived him to be but too ready to accept to-morrow, if only he knew how to ask for it, or if it could be offered to him without his asking. She

little guessed that his feeling towards her oscillated between the maddest desire and the fiercest hatred; that reveries, filled with pictured imaginings and fevered recollections of her beauty; alternated with the most violent efforts to cleanse his mind and imagination of the thought of her.

She understood nothing of all this, and it was impossible that she should understand it. In truth, she was innocent of any conduct which could have justified such sentiments. Why should he hate her? It was true that she sought to attract him,—true that she was scheming to lead him to a point at which he might find it so impossible to give her up, that, being well convinced that he could have her on no other terms, he might offer her marriage. But was there anything worse in that than men had been treated "since summer first was leafy?" How many men had married women in her position—women less capable of doing credit to the position to which they were raised than she was? How many men had been treated in such matters very much worse than she had any thought of treating him? She fully proposed to make him a good and true wife, and fully thought that she should do so. She was not deceiving him in any way. She made

the best of her past life—naturally; but was it to be for a moment supposed that such a man as the Marchese could, or did, imagine that she, Bianca Lalli, whose career, for the last eight years, was known to all Italy, was in the position of a young contessa just taken from her convent?

It is abundantly clear that there were difficulties in the way of the desirable understanding being arrived at, greater than either the lady was aware of, or than might usually be expected to attend similar negotiations.

Bianca waited without impatience the coming of the Marchese. She was a study for an artist as she lay perfectly still on her sofa, turning the minutes of expectation to profit by arranging in her mind her plan of attack in the coming battle; for she was thoroughly determined that that evening should not pass without some progress towards the *understanding* having been accomplished.

One lamp on the table alone lighted the small but comfortable-looking room; but the flame was leaping cheerfully among the logs on the hearth, and the sofa was so placed that the fitful light from the fire glanced in a thousand capricious reflections on the Diva's auburn hair and rich satin dress. It was

black of the most lustrous quality, and fitted her person with a perfection that showed the shape of the bust, and the lithe suppleness of the slender waist to the utmost advantage. The dress was made low on the superb shoulders—the dazzling whiteness of which, as seen contrasted with the black satin, was now covered with a slight silk scarlet shawl,—a most artistic completion of the harmonious colouring of the picture, which yet was not so fixed in its position as to be prevented from falling from the snowy slopes it veiled at the smallest movement of them.

Presently the now well-known step and well-known tap at the door were heard, and the Diva, without stirring a hair's-breadth from her charmingly-chosen attitude, spoke, in a silver voice, the "Passi" which admitted her visitor.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DIVA SHOWS HER CARDS.

"Ah, Signor Marchese," she said, with a sweet, but somewhat sad, smile, extending to him a long, white, slender, nervous-looking, ungloved hand, but not otherwise moving from her position. "Ah, Signor Marchese, then I am not to be disappointed this evening? I was beginning almost to fear that the fates were against me."

He advanced to the head of the sofa and took her hand, and held it awhile, while he continued to stand there looking down from behind her shoulder on the beautiful form as it lay there beneath his gaze—on the parting of the rich golden hair; on the snowy forehead; on the still whiter neck; on the gentle heaving of the bosom beneath its light veil of scarlet silk; on the tapering waist; on the exquisitely-formed feet peeping in their black satin bottines from beneath the

extremity of her dress! It was all perfect: and the Marchese held the soft warm hand that served as a conductor to the stream of magnetic poison that seemed to flood his whole being as he gazed.

For an instant all the room seemed to swim round with him. The blood rushed to his brow. He shut his eyes, and a nervous crispation caused the fingers of his hands to close themselves with such force, that the grasp of that which held her little palm hurt her.

"Ah, my hand! you hurt my hand!" she said. "You don't know how you squeezed it, you are so strong. You don't know the quantity of force put out!"

"Pardon—a thousand pardons, Signora! I am such a clumsy clown! Have I really hurt you, Bianca?"

"Not to the death, Signor," she said, with a charming smile, and holding up to him the injured member, shaking it as she let it dangle from the slender wrist. "But see! it is really all blushing red from the ardour of your hand's embrace!"

"Poor little hand!—indeed, it is!" said the Marchese, taking it gently and tenderly between both of his; then, suddenly throwing himself on his knees by the side of the sofa, while he still held it, he said,

"And how can the great cruel hand that did the harm make fit amends?"

"Ah, Signor Marchese, it might find the way to do that, if it were so disposed. It would not be so far to seek. But you are seeking in the wrong direction," she continued, drawing herself back from him on the sofa, as he, leaning forward against it, had brought himself so near to her, that the back of the hand in which he held hers touched her waist. "You are seeking amiss. It is not so that any remedy can be found; and—pray rise, Signor, and take your usual chair. This must not be,—I am sure you would not willingly give me pain, Marchese, and you *are* paining me. Pray leave the sofa."

She had drawn herself back away from him as far as the breadth of the sofa would allow, yet without withdrawing her hand from him; and she looked at him certainly more in sorrow than in anger,—looked into his face earnestly with grave, sad eyes, and heaved a long sigh as he, after pressing the hurt hand to his lips, rose from his knees and took the chair she had pointed to.

"Pain you, Bianca?" he said, as he sat down; "why should I pain you? You do me no more than justice when you say that I would not do so

willingly; but have you thought how much pain you inflict on me by thus keeping me at a distance from you? I think you must know that. Is there aught to offend you in anything that I have done, or said, or hoped, or wished?"

"I think, Signor Marchese," she said, dropping her large eyes beneath their long fringes, and looking adorably lovely as she did so, "I am afraid that what you have wished is—what some might deem offensive to a lady."

And as she spoke she looked out furtively from behind her eyelashes.

"Bianca, is that reasonable?" he said, in a tone of remonstrance. "*Diamine*, let us talk common sense; we are not children. Have you always found such wishes as mine offensive in others?"

"Yes, always—always offensive, always cruel," she said, with extreme energy; "but—can you not understand, Signor Marchese, — can you not conceive that what from one man passes and makes no mark, and leaves no sting, may from another—— What cared I what all the empty-headed young fops who came in my way could say or do; they were nothing to me. But—I did not expect pain from the Marchese Lamberto di Castelmare. I—I thought

—I hoped—I—I flattered myself—fool, idiot fool that I have been!" she exclaimed, bursting into violent sobs, and hiding her face with her hands.

The Marchese was startled and utterly taken aback for a minute or two. He was genuinely at a loss to interpret the cause or the meaning of the lady's emotion. His puzzled embarrassment did not, however, prevent him from seeing that she looked, if possible, more fascinatingly beautiful in her grief and her tears than he had ever before seen her. And, again, despite what she had said, he knelt down by the side of the sofa, and gently removing her hands from before her face, murmured in her ear,—

"Bianca, what is it—what is moving you so? Don't you know that you are dear to me;—that I would—— Don't you know that I would do anything to be agreeable to you rather than give you any sorrow or pain? What is there within my power that I would not do? Bianca,—let me tell you—let me speak the truth—I cannot keep it in my own heart any longer—I love you! You have come to be all that I care for in the world. Bianca, do you hear me? For your love I would sacrifice all,—everything in the world; I die without it; I must

have it—I must! You have been loved before; but never as I love you—never, never! And, Bianca, I—I—Bianca, you are my first love—my only love. Never, till I saw you, did I care to look on a woman for a second time; I never felt love. But, when I saw you—the first time—the first hour—Bianca, I must have your love or die; I thirst—I hunger for it. Since I have known you all my nature is changed; all my old life is flat and unmeaning, and without interest to me. I care for none of the things I used to care for; all—all has melted and slipped away from me, and nothing remains but one great devouring rage and passion—my love for you!"

He had spoken like a torrent, which, for a long time dammed up, at last becomes too powerful for restraint, and bursts forth, overthrowing all obstacles with its headlong flood.

Bianca turned her face away from him towards the back of the sofa; but she slowly, and with an uncertain intermittent movement, drew his hand over to her lips, and pressed it against them.

A light came into the Marchese Lamberto's eyes; —a gleam almost, one would have said, rather fierce than fond, as he felt the pressure of her lips; and a shock as from an electric spark ran

through all his body, making him quiver from head to heel.

"Bianca, Bianca! You are mine — you are mine!" he cried, pantingly, with his mouth close to her ear, and encircling her waist, as he spoke, with the hand which she had relinquished after she had kissed it in the manner that had been described.

But she sprang away from him, pushing him from her, by putting her flat hand against his forehead, with her face still turned towards the back of the sofa, away from him.

"No, no, no!" she cried, violently; "it cannot be, not so—not so! I cannot—I cannot!"

"Bianca," he cried, starting to his feet as if he had been stung; "what does this mean? What am I to understand? What is it you wish? You know my position. I tell you that there is no sacrifice that I am not willing to make. I am rich; name what you would wish."

"Spare me—spare me, I deserve all; but spare me! I deserve to suffer, but not at your hand," she cried, in words interrupted by her sobs.

"Spare you what, Bianca? In truth, I do not understand you," said the Marchese, genuinely mystified.

"*Do* you not understand?" she said, turning round on the sofa, so as to face him, and looking into his face with those great appealing eyes suffused with tears; "do you not understand? Can you not comprehend? A woman would understand, I think; but I suppose men feel these things differently."

"Upon my honour, Bianca, I do *not* know what you mean. Every word I have spoken to you has been spoken from the very depth of my heart. I am ready to——"

"Hush, hush, Marchese! No more of that; I could not bear it," she said, with a great sigh that seemed as if it would burst her bosom; "it is very—very painful to me; but I must endeavour to bring your heart to understand me,—it must be your heart, Lamber—your heart, Signor Marchese; for one does not arrive at the understanding of such things with the head. See, now, I will put myself in the place I deserve to occupy—in the dust at your feet! You may trample on me, if you will. I say I have deserved the shame and the misery I am now suffering. I deserve them because I have no right to resent the—the—the proposals which you—wish to make to me. I have suffered much from calumny

and evil tongues — much from unhappy circumstances and evil surroundings. Yet it may be that I — have — more right to — resent—what—I have heard from you than you imagine. But let that pass. You know—or think you know—that I have accepted from others that which I have said I cannot accept from you; and you cannot imagine why this should be so. Oh, Marchese, does your heart lend you no aid to the understanding of it? What were those men,—those empty creatures whose gold could not repay the disgust occasioned by their presence, —what were they to me? Did they love—pretend even to love—me? Did I love them? Love! Alas, alas, alas! Ah, Marchese, a poor girl exposed to the world, as I have been from my cradle upwards, has to suffer much that might well move the pity of a generous heart; but it is nothing—nothing—nothing to the tragedy of the misery, the shame, the remorse that comes upon her when at last the day shall come that her heart speaks and shows to her the awful chasm — the immeasurable gulf that separates such—— I cannot, Lamber—pardon, I don't know what I am saying;—I cannot go on—I cannot put it into words! *Do* not you—*cannot* you understand the difference?"

"I *do* understand, *Bianca mia; povera anima sofferente*—I *do* understand. Do you imagine that I would judge you harshly—severely? I know too well all that you would say; I know the difficulties, the impossibilities of your position. Do you think that I cannot make allowances for all the fatalities attending on such a combination of circumstances? And, trust me, the difference between what has been, and what I so earnestly hope may be now, is greater,—I feel it to be *greater*, not *less* than you can feel it to be. Truly there is nothing in common between the all-devouring passion which consumes me, and—such love-vows as you have spoken of. Do I *not* understand the difference. And remember, Bianca, dearest, that the protection I offer you would be the means of placing you out of the reach,—far out of the reach of any such disgusts,—such suffering for the future."

Bianca let her head fall on her bosom, and covered her face with her hands, and remained silent for some moments. Then, lifting her face slowly, and shaking her head, she sighed deeply as she looked with a wistful earnest glance into his eyes; she said,—

"You are good,—*you* are,—very good and kind to me; perhaps it might have been better for my

happiness if you had been less so. But bear with me yet a little, Signor Marchese. Sit down there,—there where I can see your face,"—pointing, as she spoke, to a spot exactly in face of the sofa,—"and let me see if I can explain myself to you. It is difficult; it is very difficult. A woman, as I said, would understand it at once; but men — are so different. You have told me, Signor Marchese, that you love me; that you never loved before; that I am the first woman who has ever moved your heart. *Eh, bene,* Signor Marchese! If I, having heard those protestations, were to confess that—that it was with me even as with you,"—she dropped her eyes and sighed as she made the confession;—"that I, too—that you have taught me now for the first time what it is to love,—though I might speak it less eloquently than you have done, the words would be equally true,—equally true, Signor," she repeated, slowly nodding her head. "And when I have confessed that it is so," she continued, speaking more rapidly, "can you wonder — can you not understand that it is impossible to me—that it would be a horror unspeakable to—to renew with the object of a true love—the first—the first, as God sees my heart—the degradation that has left nothing but

bitterness and humiliation behind it? Shall the name of Lamberto di Castelmare be written in my memory in the hateful list of those who have been to me the occasion of remorse, of self-condemnation, of bitterness immeasurable? Never, never, never! Come what may there shall be one pure place in my heart; one unsoiled spot in my life; one ever-dear remembrance unlinked with sorrow and with shame; one memory which, however sad, shall not be humiliating."

She put her handkerchief to her eyes as she ceased speaking, and appeared to be entirely overcome by her emotion.

The Marchese rose from his chair in a state of hardly less agitation. He walked across the room; —returned to the sofa, and seemed for a moment as if he were going to take her hand; then turned away, and stood on the hearth-rug with his back to the fire. He was much moved, puzzled, pained, disappointed, — goaded and lashed more violently than ever by the furies of passion; more than ever wishing that he had never seen the beautiful creature lying there before him, and more than ever writhing in mind under the consciousness that to give her up was beyond his power.

At length he again stepped up to the side of the sofa and took her hand.

She started; and plucked it from him.

"Go, Signor Marchese—go, and leave me. It would perhaps be better so for both of us. I am not used to show to anybody the very inmost secrets of my heart, as I have been doing to you,—I know not why. Forget what I have said. Go, and forget me; —forget the poor comedian to whom your goodness, your nobleness, and—your love—seemed for a passing minute to open a blessed glimpse of a heaven upon earth; but never — never again propose to me to associate the name of Lamberto di Castelmare with names that I would—oh, so fain—forget!"

Still the Marchese had not realized the nature of the position or seen the only outlet from the *cul-de-sac* into which he had been driven. It involved too monstrous an impossibility to seem to him to be an outlet at all. What was the real meaning of all this? Then suddenly an in-rushing suspicion flashed across his mind like a blasting lightning brand, bringing with it a sharp pang, as of a dagger stab in the heart. What was the meaning of all these protestations of admiration and affection, coupled with a denial of all that his passion drove him there in search of? Did

it perchance mean that this woman, so terrible in the power of her beauty, so dangerously irresistible, would fain have the protection which his position could give her, the supplies which might be drawn from his purse, while her love—such love as he wanted from her—would be given to a younger rival ?

Suddenly he asked her, "When was the Marchese Ludovico here last?"

"The Marchese Ludovico?" said Bianca, carelessly; "oh, he is often here. When last? Let me see: he was here this morning. As good and noble a gentleman as any in Italy he is, too. He is worthy to bear your name, Marchese, though it is only a poor girl like me that says it."

"He seems to have won your good will, anyhow," said the Marchese, frowning heavily. "What answer, I wonder, would he get if he were to speak to you—as I spoke just now?"

"He would never speak so, Signor Marchese; he would know that, whatever might have been the case in past years, alas! it would be useless or worse to speak so now. I do not say, indeed, that—I have a sincere regard for the Marchese Ludovico. This much you may be very sure of, Marchese, that

the feelings which you have surprised me into confessing would make it quite impossible for me to listen to any such words from the Marchese Ludovico. But, if ever the Marchese Ludovico were to say any word in my ear,—it would not be," continued Bianca, dropping her voice and speaking as if more to herself than to him — "it would not be to offer me what his uncle was offering me just now."

And now it flashed upon the Marchese for the first time what the real drift of Bianca's words and conduct had been. She wanted to be Marchesa di Castelmare. And the meaning of her last words, with their reticences and their half-uttered expressions spoken out at length might, he thought, be read thus:—If you, Marchese Lamberto, do not make me Marchesa di Castelmare, your nephew will be ready enough to do so. The scandal, the wrong done to the family name, the chatter of all the tongues in Ravenna will be none the less. The matter would be, indeed, worse instead of better. For it would involve the grave injury that would be done to the Lady Violante, and the destruction of all the hopes built upon that alliance. All this seemed to be revealed to him as by a lightning

flash. But the pang of jealousy, which had stung his heart, still remained the foremost and most prominent occupation of his mind.

"If you imagine, Bianca," he said after a while, "that my nephew would, or could, however much he might wish to do so, make any other kind of proposal to you, you are labouring under a delusion. I speak in all sincerity of heart."

"And I have spoken to you, God knows, with all sincerity, Signor Marchese. I have spoken as I have never before spoken to any human being. I have opened my heart to you to the very bottom of it. But the effort of doing so has been a painful one. It has terribly overset me; I feel like a wrung-out rag; and would fain rest. You will not be offended if I ask you to leave me now. It is getting late, too; and I expect my father home every instant. Good-night, Signor Marchese. Forgive me if I have said aught that I should not have said; if I have in any way offended you. I think you know how far the wish to do so is from my heart. Good-night."

"Good-night, Bianca," said the Marchese, taking the hand she held out to him, and retaining it in his own for some instants, despite his intention of

specially abstaining from any demonstration of the kind — "Good-night, Bianca. We shall meet to-morrow morning."

"Yes, on business," said Bianca, looking up into his face with a sad smile. "Signor Ercole said he should be here at midday."

And then the Marchese left her, and, carefully shunning the more frequented parts of the city, returned to his own home.

CHAPTER IX.

ONE STRUGGLE MORE.

The Marchese reached the Palazzo Castelmare unobserved by any one, save old Quinto Lalli, who had been for some time past watching the door of his adopted daughter from a neighbouring corner, in order to ascertain when he might go home to his bed without infringing the order that had been given him.

"And what do you think of it now, *papa mio*?" said the Diva, when she had very faithfully, though summarily, recounted the scene which had just passed, to her old friend and counsellor.

"Well, I see no reason to despair of the result," said Quinto. "You did not expect him to jump at the idea of making you Marchesa di Castelmare, I suppose? Of course he was a little staggered; and, probably, his own notion at this moment is, that he

would rather never see your face again, than dream of such a thing. *Ma, ci vuol pazienza!* My notion is, that you will have him nibbling at the hook again before long. That little hint about the nephew was masterly. Depend upon it that will do its work."

"But, Quinto, I did not say a word to him that was not true—hardly a word. I do like him better, by an hundred times, than any other man I ever knew; and if I succeed, you see if I do not make him a good wife; I swear I will! As for Signor Ludovico, that is all trash and nonsense. He belongs to his Venetian, body and soul: and he has enough to think of, poor boy, in scheming to get out of the marriage they have planned for him."

"What! he wants to marry the Venetian, does he?" asked Quinto.

"Yes; they have engaged themselves to each other; she would not hear of anything else."

"Lord bless me! how moral and respectable the world is growing. I suppose Cupid himself will be attended by a gentleman in cassock and bands before long, and Mars will make Venus an honest woman, as the phrase goes. Well, I am not sorry I had my day in the old time. It would be rare fun, though, if these grand Signori, the uncle and the nephew, were

both to be hooked in the same fashion at the same time."

"There is nothing against the character of the Venetian of any sort," said Bianca, with a sigh.

"Ta, ta, ta! I'd back your chance of the uncle against her chance of the nephew, any day of the week."

"Ludovico is solemnly engaged to her."

"I'd hold to my bet, all the same for that; and now let's get to bed, you have to sing to-morrow night."

"Yes, and I'm regularly tired out; good-night."

The Marchese Lamberto was probably hardly less in need of rest, when he reached the Palazzo Castelmare. But he did not equally feel that it was within his reach. He shut himself into his room; and throwing himself into an easy chair, with one hand pressed to his fevered brow, strove to think; set himself to think out the possibilities of the present, and the prospects of the future, as far as the blinding volcano-bursts of passion, which ever and anon threatened to sweep all power of thought away, would permit him to do so.

So this was the meaning of all the difficulties, which Bianca had made. She had absolutely conceived

the idea of his marrying her. Heavens and earth! Was she mad? But, at all events, if this notion had been the cause of all her fighting off of his advances for the last month past, it was not necessary to attribute her conduct to any preference for some more favoured lover; she had assured him that she loved him—loved him as she had never loved another And, gracious heaven, how lovely she looked as she said it!

He pressed his hands before his eyes, and saw again in fancy the beautiful vision; gloated on the eloquent movement of her person in the earnestness of her confession; looked again into those large appealing honest eyes, which seemed to be so incapable of lending their voucher to a lie. Surely it could not be that all those protestations and assurances were false,—mere comedy got up for the purpose of deluding him. That she was worldlily anxious to secure so great a prize as that which she was trying for was natural enough—was matter of course. But surely, surely there was genuine affection in that glance. Was it not likely to be genuine,—that feeling that she could not be to him what she had been to others? It must have been abundantly clear to her that had she chosen to accept

from him what he had offered her, she might have amply satisfied any mercenary views, the most exorbitant. Therefore her views and her feelings were of a different order.

And then the thought of being so loved by such a creature—of being really loved for himself—loved as she had never loved before, made for the moment all other thought impossible to him: he started from his chair, and paced the room with rapid disordered strides. What was all the world to the ecstasy of such a love? All—all that he had hitherto lived for, was it not flat, stale, poor, puerile, in comparison to it? Why not leave all, and seize a happiness so infinitely greater than any he had ever known or imagined? Why not marry her, and be hers for ever, as she was anxious to be his? Nobles of higher rank than his had done as much before. Why not?

What would they all say and think? All his world, that he had lived among, and lived for, from his cradle upwards: the Cardinal, his sister, his nephew, Violante? The whole society which had looked up to him as some one altogether above the sphere of human frailties and follies: how could he face them? What say to them? Why face them at all? Why not leave all, and make a new world for himself and the

one dear companion of it? Marry her, and take her safe away from all her past, and from all his. Why not?

But would she consent to that? Would that be her idea of a marriage with the Marchese di Castelmare? Was it not likely that she would prefer to be Marchesa di Castelmare in the Palazzo Castelmare,—in Ravenna, where—ha!—where Ludovico was, for whom she had so much regard? who was so frequently with her. That poor Violante! Of course he knew that there could be no love between her and his nephew. Ludovico had promised that that marriage should be made. Ay, marry the uncle, to be the nephew's mistress with all convenience! Such things had often been; there was nothing new in the arrangement—nothing original in the idea—why, the very stage was full of such examples: he to be the old duped husband of the farce; he saw it all.

And as these thoughts also suggested themselves to his mind, his heart seemed as though it were clutched by a hand of ice, while his brow throbbed and his head burned with the pulsing blood.

He threw himself on to his chair again, and tore his hair with rage and anguish; and all those vivid and palpitating love-representations which passion had but now painted on the retina of his eye, were

reproduced by jealousy with the difference that Ludovico instead of himself was the actor in them.

It was maddening; his brain seemed to reel; a cold sweat broke out all over him. The fear dashed across his mind that he should really lose his reason.

Was there, he thought to himself, as the terror of this made him shudder—was there that night in all Ravenna so miserable a being as himself? And that miserable man, cowering there in the restlessness of his agony, was the Marchese Lamberto di Castelmare; he whose whole life had been one placid scene of happiness, prosperity, and content. Never had he known a passion strong enough and forbidden enough to cause him a pang or a sleepless hour till now. Had not his life been happy? What did he want with more? Ah, if he could but blot out for ever all that the last month had brought with it. If he could but be again as he had been before this woman had cast her sorcery on him. Ah, would to God that his eyes had never seen her!

Was it yet too late? Could he not even now tear her from his mind, shut his eyes to the recollection of her, so command his imagination that it should never again present the image of her to his fancy?

And thereupon forthwith uncommanded fancy was busy with every detail of the beauties that had so made him their slave. The line of the neck and shoulder which he had looked down on as he stood at the sofa head; all the white ivory from the fresh innocent rosy little ear to the swell of the curves about the bosom; the intoxicating perfume from the heavy tresses of the hair; the lithe slender waist, round and yielding; the slight nervous hands, the touch of whose fingers fired the blood, as a match fires gunpowder; the exquisite feet; and, oh God! that face, whose every feature, as he last looked on it, was harmonized in an expression of love.

Quite still he sate for some minutes, conscious of nothing save the pictures which memory was passing before his eye. Then suddenly, with a bound, he sprang from his chair, and away from it, and beat his head against the opposite wall of the large room.

"Fool, fool; enslaved, besotted idiot! I am lost, spelled; the victim of sorcery I cannot fight against. What am I to do, what am I to do? Surely I can keep my steps from going near her. If I were to swear now that I will never set eyes on her more?"

And then he recollected that it was impossible for

him even to seek that means of safety without giving rise to all kinds of observations, and wonder, and speculation in the city. He was to see the *prima donna* on the following day. His habits in such matters, well known to all the town, brought him into frequent contact with Bianca, as with other ladies who had been similarly engaged in Ravenna. What would be thought, or guessed, or said, if he were suddenly to refuse to hold any further communication with her?

And would he not thus be simply leaving the coast all free to his nephew? To be sure. There, there, he could see it all. And that was the worst hell of all. Anything, anything was preferable to that. Come what would that should never, never, never be. Rather—rather anything. He gnashed his teeth, and clenched his hand; and a sudden agony of hatred for both Bianca and his nephew seemed to steal like a snake into his heart, and maddened him.

And thus the miserable man passed the greater part of the night in useless strugglings with the bonds that bound him.

It was near morning before he crept, still sleepless, but utterly worn out, to his bed.

He did sleep, exhausted as he was, after awhile; but it was only to see again in dreams all that he had so bitterly wished that he had never seen at all. Sometimes he was himself by Bianca's side, licensed to revel to the full in her every charm. And then the dream would change. It was Ludovico he saw in her white arms; and he started from his fevered sleep bathed in perspiration and quivering in every limb.

The next morning he was, in truth, quite ill enough to have furnished a very sufficient and unsuspected excuse for not going to meet the *impresario* at Bianca's house according to appointment. He thought at first that he would do so. But as the time drew near, he dragged himself from his bed, haggard, fevered, and looking very ill, and crawled to the appointed meeting.

BOOK IV.

THE LAST DAYS OF THE CARNIVAL.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE CARDINAL'S CHAPEL.

Paolina was industriously pursuing her task in the chapel of the Cardinal's palace. Ludovico was not so frequently with her there as he had been while she was at work in San Vitale. But there were evident reasons why this was necessarily the case. The chapel in question is a private one, and is accessible only by passing through a portion of the Cardinal's residence. At San Vitale Ludovico needed to take nobody into his confidence, when he climbed to Paolina's scaffolding to be by her side while she worked, save the old sacristan. But to have joined her at her work in the Cardinal's palace, he must have knocked at the door of the residence, and told the servants what he wanted.

And that would have been obviously inconvenient, even without mentioning the fact that the Lady

Violante, to whom the gentleman ought to have been addressing himself, passed much of her time at the palace, and might very possibly have been met by him there.

It was true that, ever since the ball at the Castelmare palazzo, on the second day of the year, Ludovico had felt pretty nearly sure that Violante was as desirous of escaping from the marriage which had been arranged as he was himself. But it did not at all follow that it would be an easy matter to break it off. Of course it was not to be expected that Violante herself could take any active step towards refusing to fulfil the promise that her family had made for her. That would be for him to do. And except as regarded his intercourse with the lady, and her personal feelings, the task of doing so was hardly rendered any the easier by the knowledge that he would be consulting her wishes as well as his own.

It would hardly, therefore, have done in any way for him to have been visiting the young artist in the Cardinal Legate's chapel.

The intercourse, however, between Ludovico and Paolina was much pleasanter and more unrestrained than it had been before that explanation, which had

ensued between them. He was a frequent visitor at the house in the Via di Sta. Eufemia in the evening; and the happy hours were passed by them on the perfectly understood footing of mutual betrothal.

And Ludovico was perfectly honest and sincere in all that he said to Paolina. He said nothing to her that he did not equally say to himself. And if his conduct under the circumstances was not exactly what a father or brother of Paolina might have desired it to be, the fault arose from the indecision of character, which belonged to a weak man accustomed to self-indulgence. There was difficulty and annoyance before him; and instead of meeting it, as a strong man would have done, he turned from it, and was content to put off the evil day, contenting himself with the enjoyment of that which was passing. He marvelled somewhat at the ease, with which he was permitted to pass evening after evening with his mistress,—at the absence of surveillance, of which he was conscious,—and at the silence of his uncle as to both his visits to Via di Sta. Eufemia, and his no visits to the Lady Violante. But he troubled himself little to account for this, or to question the reason of the goods the gods provided him. It was not in his character to do so.

Paolina, on her side, was, upon the whole, trustful and contented. Yet there had been moments at which she had suffered a passing pang from little gossipings which had been, perhaps injudiciously, repeated to her by Orsola Steno. Of course the great *prima donna*, the celebrated Lalli, who was blessing Ravenna by her presence, was often talked of in the Via di Sta. Eufemia, as she was in every other house in the city. That was quite a matter of course. And then Orsola would speak of the strict conduct of the lady; of the fact that no one of the young nobles of the place was permitted to visit her —except, indeed, the young Marchese Ludovico; and how people did say that half-a-dozen would be safer company than one; and that the young Marchese was finishing the sowing of his wild oats before becoming a married man by a flirtation with one of the most celebrated beauties of Italy.

There was very little cause for this gossip beyond what the reader is aware of. Still, upon the whole, it might have been better if Ludovico had seen less of the fascinating singer. He had given cause enough for spiteful tongues to make mischief if they could do so; and it may probably be supposed that he was not insensible to the fascinations of Bianca—

perhaps not to the glory of the fact that he was the only young man admitted to her society, and that he had occasionally done that which, being repeated, might not unnaturally give umbrage to Paolina.

It was now within ten days or so of the end of Carnival; and, while almost everybody else was amusing themselves in some way or other, Poalina stuck close to her work in the chapel, intent on her silent and solitary task, while, from time to time, the voices of revellers in the streets would reach her in her seclusion.

But all her hours of work there had not passed in utter solitude.

The Contessa Violante was in the habit of spending much of her time in the palace of her great-uncle the Cardinal Legate. It presented, among other advantages, that of being pretty well the only place in which she could escape for awhile from the companionship of the Signora Assunta Fagiani, her duenna. Certainly, it would not have been consistent with that lady's conception of her duty to allow her charge to visit any other house whatever in the city, without the protection of her companionship, but the palace of a Cardinal Legate—and that Legate her great-uncle. Besides that, her great-

aunt, the Cardinal's sister, was also often at her brother's residence; and, having this facility close at hand, Violante was wont very frequently to avail herself of the privacy, comfort, and warmth of her uncle's chapel for the morning's devotions, which she never missed.

One morning she found a small portable scaffold or estrade of deals standing in one corner of the chapel; and, on inquiring for what purpose it had been placed there, she was told that it was to enable an artist to make a copy of some of the mosaics on the vault of the little apartment. She learned further that the artist in question was a young Venetian lady: that she was a protégée of the Marchese Lamberto; and that the permission to execute the copies in question, and to have that scaffolding placed there, had been obtained by him.

Then Violante knew right well who the Venetian artist was. The worthy Assunta Fagiani had taken care that all the gossip of Ravenna which connected this girl's name with that of Ludovico di Castelmare should reach her ears. And she was glad of the easy opportunity which thus offered itself to her of gratifying her natural curiosity respecting the stranger—the girl who could win that love which had

been promised to her, but which she had been unable to inspire.

This Paolina Foscarelli—she well knew her name—was, in some sense, her rival. Ludovico di Castelmare was bidden to love her, the Contessa Violante, and instead of doing so, had given his love, as she had been assured, to this Venetian. She knew, indeed, quite well that had the stranger never come near Ravenna, Ludovico would not have loved her the more. She did not love Ludovico. She was anxious to be quit of the engagement it had been proposed to make between them; and it might be very likely that this girl might be serviceable to her, rather than otherwise, in helping to bring about such a consummation.

Nevertheless, there was a certain amount of bitterness—such bitterness, more akin to self-depreciation, as could find place in the gentle heart of Violante—in the thought of what might have been; in the thought that she was irrevocably excluded from that which it had been so easy for this poor stranger artist to attain; and, above all, there was a strong curiosity to see the beauty which had accomplished this; to hear the voice which had been able to charm; and, further, in her own interest, to ascertain, if that should be possible,

whether the tie which she had been told existed between this girl and the man who had been assigned to her for a husband, was, or was not, of a nature likely to lead to a marriage between them.

At first sight this would have seemed impossible to the aristocratic notions of the Cardinal Legate's niece. But Assunta Fagiani, whose object had been simply to convince Violante that no union between herself and Ludovico would ever take place, despite all appearances to the contrary, had given her to understand that it was whispered as a thing not impossible—such was Ludovico's infatuation—that he might even go the length of making such an alliance.

One morning, soon after the commencement of her work in the chapel, whither she had been escorted on her first going thither by the Marchese Lamberto himself in person, in accordance with his promise, Violante, on entering the chapel, saw that the little scaffold had been pulled out from its corner and placed immediately under one of the medallion portraits of the Apostles, on the vault of the building. She looked up, and perceiving the artist above her at her work, paused, hesitating before kneeling at the footstool in front of the altar.

In an instant a light step tripped down the steps

of the wooden erection, and a little figure, clad in a brown holland frock, which wrapped it from head to foot, stood by her side.

Paolina knew very well who the lady that had entered the chapel was: and, as may be easily imagined, she too was not without her share of curiosity.

"Do I disturb you, Signorina?" said Paolina, in a sweet, gentle voice. "If you would prefer it, I will wait till you have finished your prayer. I can kneel here too the while."

Violante looked at the girlish face, bright not only with the elements of material beauty, but with the animation of intelligence and the informing expression of talent. One would have said that nothing could well be less becoming than such a long shapeless wrapper as that which the artist wore. There was the band at the waist, which showed that the figure was slight and slender; but, for the rest, a less ornamental costume could not well be imagined. Nevertheless, Violante perfectly well perceived and understood at a glance that this girl had what she had not—a something by virtue of which it was possible for her to win a man's love, while for herself it was, or seemed to her appreciation of herself, impossible.

"Oh, no, Signorina," answered Violante, gently,

"the knowledge that you were painting up there would not suffice to distract my thoughts. But will you not let me look at your work? It must be very difficult to copy these strange old wall-paintings. May I climb up? I know your friend the Marchese Lamberto well. Do you know who I am?"

"Pray come up, Signorina, if you have any curiosity. Oh, yes, I know your ladyship. I saw you once in the Cardinal's carriage. You are his niece, the Contessa Violante," replied Paolina, blushing a little at the name of the Marchese Lamberto, only because, though assuredly not the rose, he lived close to it.

So the two girls climbed the steps of the estrade together.

"How came you to know the Marchese Lamberto?" asked Violante, after they had matured their acquaintanceship by a little talk about the subject of Paolina's work.

"Only because the Englishman, who employed me to copy these mosaics, gave me a letter to him. He seems to be very highly esteemed."

"More so than any other man in all Ravenna,—except my uncle the Cardinal, I suppose I ought to say; he is a most excellent man in all ways. But

you know his nephew also, the Marchese Ludovico? *non è vero?*" said Violante, looking down on the ground, while a pale blush came over her white cheeks.

"Yes," replied Paolina, flushing crimson, and similarly looking down, but stealing a side-glance under her eyelashes at her companion,—"yes; I became acquainted with him also in the same manner—at least, on the same occasion; and, in truth, I have seen more of him than of his uncle, for the Marchese Lamberto is always so busy, and he commissioned his nephew to do all that he could to assist us, when we were first settling ourselves here."

"And you found him kind, too; as kind as his uncle?" said Violante, stealing a sidelong glance at Paolina.

"Yes, indeed, Signorina," said she, feeling not a little embarrassment.

"Paolina—you see I know your name, and I think it such a pretty one—Paolina," said the Contessa Violante, yielding to a sudden impulse, and taking the hand of the blushing girl, who kept her eyes fixed on the ground, "shall we be friends, and speak openly to each other? I should like to."

"Oh, Signorina! so should I, so much. There is nothing I should like so much—almost nothing,"

replied Paolina, looking up into her face, with her own still crimson.

"Tell me, then, if you ever heard my name mentioned in connection with that of the Marchese Ludovico?" said Violante, looking with a rather sad and subdued, but yet arch, smile into Paolina's eyes.

"Yes, Signorina, I have so heard," said Paolina, raising her head with a proud movement, and looking, with well-opened eyes and clear brow, into Violante's face as she spoke. "I have heard that it was intended by both your families that you and the Marchese Ludovico should be married."

"Yes; everybody in Ravenna, I believe, expects to see such a marriage before long; do you? We are to be friends, you know, and speak frankly to each other; do you expect it, Paolina?" asked Violante, still holding her hand, and looking with a smile, half shrewd, half sad, into her face.

Paolina remained silent a minute or two, again dropping her clear honest eyes to the ground. Then raising them again, she said in an almost whispered voice, but looking straight at her companion,—

"No, Signorina, I do not expect that; for he has promised to marry me."

"Ah—h! it is a relief to hear you say so. My dear Paolina, I am so glad," said the elder girl, putting a hand on each of Paolina's shoulders, and kissing her on the forehead — "I am so glad; much for your own sake, somewhat, too, for his, and much for my own sake. For, Paolina, I could not marry Ludovico. If he asked me to do so, it would be only done in obedience to the will of his uncle. He does not—no, 'tis no fault of yours, my child—never has loved me."

"Signora, when first I—allowed him to teach me to love him, I knew nothing of any duty that he owed elsewhere. And when I did know it I determined, even if it should break my heart, to refuse any such love as should have been stolen from a wife," said Paolina.

"That was the part of a good and honest girl. And for me, I have to thank you for it. Paolina, I hope you may be happy. We shall often meet here, shall we not?"

"Not often here, Signora. My task here is not a long one; and I hope by the end of Carnival to have finished it, so that I may go to St. Apollinare, outside the town, where I have to make several copies. It is very desirable not to go there later;

because when the warm weather comes it becomes so unhealthy there."

"Yes; but we have some days yet before the end of the Carnival; and till then you will be at work every day here?"

"Si, Signora; I hope so."

"Then I hope we shall have several more opportunities of seeing each other. And now I must not keep you from your work any longer. Shall we be friends?"

"Oh, Signorina; it is too good of you to ask me, a poor artist. And when—it would be my greatest pride to have such a friend."

And then the girls kissed and parted: Violante to kneel for her daily devotions, at the footstool before the altar; and Paolina to continue her copying. And after that they had frequent meetings in the little chapel, and learned to become fast friends.

The Carnival was now drawing near its end; and the city had been promised that before the time of cakes and ale should be over, and that of sackcloth and ashes should begin, the divine *prima donna* should appear in one more new part. And, after much deliberation and debate, it had been decided that this should be Bellini's masterpiece, *La Sonnam-*

bula. She was to sing it on one night only—the last Sunday of the Carnival; and the attraction on that night was proportionably great. The *Sonnambula*, then in the first blush of its immense popularity, had never yet been heard in Ravenna. It was one of the favourite parts of the Diva; and all the city was on the tiptoe of expectation.

It was a matter of course that all the "society" would be there. The entire first row of the boxes,—the "piano nobile," as it is called in Italian theatres,—was the private property of the various noble families of the city, which each had its box, with its coat of arms duly emblazoned on the door thereof, in that tier. Nobody who did not belong to "the society" of the town could in any way show his intruding face in the "piano nobile." But above this sacred hemicycle there was another range of boxes,—equally private boxes;—as all the boxes of an Italian theatre are;—and the key of one of these upper "loggie" had been secured by Ludovico, and presented to Signora Orsola and Paolina for the great evening.

Of course he himself would be obliged to be in his proper place in the Castelmare box, which was the stage box on the left hand of the stage.

"Whether I may be able to run up and pay you a little visit in the course of the evening, I don't know. You may be very sure I shall if I can; but there will be all the world there, of course, and *lo zio* in the box—unless, indeed, he should choose to go behind the scenes. Talking of that," he added, as he was on the point of leaving the room, "I don't know what to make of *lo zio* of late."

"Has he said anything?"

"Not a word; but I don't like the look of him. He never was more amiable as far as I am concerned; but he is not well; I never saw him as he is now. He is haggard, feverish, restless; an older man in appearance by a dozen years than he was at the beginning of Carnival."

"I suppose he has been raking too much, and wants a little rest. Lent will be good for him."

"What, he! The Marchese Lamberto raking! You don't know him. But he seems quite broken down; I should say, that he had got something on his mind, if it was not impossible. He never had any trouble in his life; and never did anything he ought not to do, I believe. But I confess he puzzles

me now. Good-night. God bless you, Paolina mia!"

That was on the Friday; and the Diva's last appearance was to take place on the following Sunday.

CHAPTER II.

THE CORSO.

The institution of Carnival and Lent in Italy seems very much as if it arose from a practical conviction in the minds of the Italians that they cannot serve two masters,—at least at the same time,—Mammon in all his forms is to be the acknowledged and exclusive lord of the hour during the first period, on condition that higher and holier claims to service shall be as unreservedly recognized when the second shall have set in.

> "Let us have wine and women, mirth and laughter,
> Sermons and sodawater the day after."

Byron has given us the rule with the most orthodox accuracy. Whether the second portion of the prescription is observed as heartily, punctually, and universally as the first, may be doubted. But in all outward form and ceremony the violence of the contrast

between the two seasons is acted out to the letter; —is, or was, as may be perhaps more correctly said now-a-days; for both Carnival jollity and licence, and Lent strictness, are from year to year less observed than used to be the case. At Rome, Mother Church exhorts her subjects to feast and laugh in Carnival, in nowise less earnestly or imperatively than she enjoins on them fasting and penances for having laughed in Lent. But her subjects will do neither the one nor the other. And when one hears reiterated complaints in Roman pulpits of pipings to which no dancers have responded, and the vain exhortations of the ecclesiastical authorities to the people to Carnival frolic and festivity, one is reminded of our own Archbishop's "Book of Sports," and led to make comparisons, by which hangs a very long tale.

Great Pan died once upon a time. And Carnival, as it used to be, is with much else dying now in Italy. But in the days to which the incidents here narrated belong, the difference between Carnival and Lent was as marked as that between day and night.

More marked indeed. For between day and night there is twilight, but the transition from Carnival to Lent is as sudden as a plunge from

sunshine into cold water. Carnival ends at twelve o'clock on the night of Shrove Tuesday. And the theory of its observance is, or was, that the fun and revelry should grow ever more fast and furious up to the last permitted moment. Then, the clock strikes; the lights are put out, Carnival dies amid one last hurrah. And maskers and revellers go home to rise the next morning with grave and perhaps yellow faces.

In Ravenna, as has been said, a great reception of all the society at the Palazzo Castelmare on the Sunday evening was as much an institution as the High Mass on a Sunday morning. And this was the course of things during all the year, except in Carnival time. Then, in order to leave Sunday evening—the great time for balls and theatres, and pleasure of all sorts—free, the reception at the Palazzo Castelmare was changed to the Monday. The programme, therefore, for the three last grand days of the Carnival in Ravenna, on that occasion, stood thus:—

On the Sunday, a grand gala Corso from four to six in the afternoon. (That is to say, that every available carriage of every sort in Ravenna would be put in requisition, and would be driven in procession,

at a slow foot pace, up and down the long street called the Corso; and those who had servants and liveries and fine horses would display them and rejoice; and those who had none of these things would mingle with the grand carriages in broken-down shandridans, and rejoice also at the sight of the finery, without the smallest feeling of shame at their own poverty. This is a Corso.) On the Sunday evening, the grand representation of the *Sonnambula*, with the theatre lighted (according to advertisement) "with wax-candles, till it was as light as day!"

Secondly, on the Monday, another Corso, with throwing of flowers and "coriandoli" (*i.e.* what was supposed to be comfits, but in reality little pills of flour made and sold by the hundredweight for the purpose) from the carriages to each other, and from the windows and the balconies of the houses. Then in the evening, a grand gala reception at the Palazzo Castelmare, at which it was understood masks would be gladly welcomed by the host.

On the night of the Tuesday, thirdly, the last great day of all, there was to be a grand masked ball at the Circolo dei Nobili; that ball of which and of its consequences on the Ash Wednesday morning,

the reader already wots. And this was to be the wind-up of the Carnival.

The Corso on the Sunday was a most successful one. The weather was all that was most desirable; bright, not too cold, and free from wind and dust. The Marchese Lamberto turned out with two handsomely appointed equipages. He and his sister-in-law occupied one carriage, and the Marchese Ludovico and the Conte Leandro Lombardone, who was not a rich man, and had no carriage of his own, sat in the second.

It could not be said that the Marchese Lamberto "looked like the time!" And, in truth, he would have given much to escape the ordeal he was called upon to go through. But that was out of the question; unless he had been confined to his bed—in which case the whole town would have been at the *palazzo* door with inquiries, and all the doctors at his bedside in consultation—it could not be that he should not show himself at the Corso.

Both the Castelmare carriages had the front seats laden with huge baskets of bouquets prepared for throwing at friends and acquaintances in other carriages, and at windows and balconies. The occupants of the carriages seemed to be embedded in

a bank of flowers. And there sat the Marchese amid this wealth of rainbow-colours, looking positively ghastly,—so changed, so drawn, so aged was he. And his painful attempts to enter into the spirit of the scene, and act the part which he was expected to act, would have been pitiable to any eye which had observed them closely.

He had left Bianca only just before it had been necessary to return to the *palazzo* to get into his carriage for the Corso: and the interview between them had been an important one. He had gone thither fully purposed to explain to her, finally, the utter impossibility of his doing as she would have him do. He meant to point out to her how exceptionally difficult it would be for him, in the peculiar position he occupied, to make her his wife. He intended to show her that such a step would have the effect of pulling him down rather than that of pulling her up. He had purposed endeavouring to induce her to accede to such proposals as he could make to her by the exhibition of the most unstinting generosity. And he had determined,—fully, finally, and irrevocably determined, that if all that he could say to her on these points should fail to persuade her to accede to such an arrangement, as he had it in his

power to propose to her, he would that day, and from that hour, give her up, and swear to himself never to let the image of her cross his memory again.

The visit had been long, and occasionally even somewhat tempestuous. The Marchese had been eloquent; and now driven to bay, had been unequivocal enough in his declarations, his determinations, and his promises. The Diva had shown herself a Diva at every point. She had wept, she had smiled, she had been scornful, she had been suppliant, she had been repellent, she had been loving! And in every mood she had seemed to the fascinated eyes of the Marchese more lovely than in that which preceded it. Finally, she had conquered. Instead of coming away from her, never to see her again, he came away leaving her with the offer of his hand.

And there had been a moment of supreme triumph and ecstasy when permitted, for the first time, to take her in his arms, and press that lovely bosom to his own, and glue his own to those heavenly lips; it had seemed to him as if the prize that was his was worth a thousand times all that he was paying for it. It was all for love, and the world well lost. For not for an instant did the Marchese blind himself to the fact that his world must be lost

by such a marriage as he was contemplating. But what did he care for all that had been hitherto to him as the breath of his nostrils? He now felt, for the first time, what of joy and real happiness life had in truth to offer. He would go away,—far away with his Bianca and live only for her, and for the delights of her love! Fool that he had been to hesitate. And blessed a thousand times was her sweet, her dear insistance, that had led him to better things!

Such was the state of the mind of the Marchese, while he held his Diva in his arms; and it lasted in full force, almost till he had left the door of her house behind him as he hastened to the *palazzo* to discharge the Corso duty, which was one of the most prominent functions of his present social position.

And then it seemed as if suddenly,—with a suddenness equal to that of a tropical sunset,—the scales had fallen from his eyes, and he was another man.

Great God! What had he done? Had he been smitten with sudden madness? What—what was the fatal power this fearful woman had over him? Were then the old witchcraft and philtre tales really true? Surely he must be the victim of some spell,

some horrible enchantment. Marry her! Heavens and earth! He hated her. He felt as if he could with pleasure take her by that beautiful throat and squeeze the noxious life out of her.

He pressed his burning hand to his yet hotter forehead, as soon as he found himself in the quiet and solitude of his own room, swallowed a large glass of water, and strove to obtain such little command over himself, for the moment at least, as might suffice to enable him to go through the task before him.

A servant knocked at the door and put his head in to announce that the carriages were at the door. The miserable man started from his chair as if he had been caught in some crime, and answered that he would be down directly. A second time he swallowed, hastily, a large glass of water, for his throat felt parched with thirst; and then, with a vigorous effort to appear gay and at his ease, which produced only the semblance of a fixed unnatural grin on his face, he went down to the carriage.

It was painful to him to pass between the servants who stood in the hall,—painful to have to take his seat by the side of his sister-in-law,—and most painful of all to meet the gaze of all the town

assembled for the Corso. He could not help thinking that all eyes were turned on him, with glances of surprise and suspicion. He felt ashamed to meet and be seen by his acquaintances. He, the Marchese Lamberto di Castelmare, who had never, till that hour, known what it was to shun the eye of any man,—who had been accustomed to be the cynosure of all eyes, and to feel that they were all turned on him with respect and regard.

The occasion, and the part he was expected to fulfil in it, made it necessary for him to recognize and return every minute the salutations and greetings of his friends and those who knew him. And who in Ravenna did not know the Marchese Lamberto? There was a good-natured word wanted here, a gallant little phrase there, a salutation with the speaking fingers to this carriage, a more formal bow to the occupants of another, a gracious nod to one person, and a smile to a second.

And all this the unhappy man essayed to perform, he had so often performed it happily, easily, and successfully in other days.

It was impossible for anybody, whose eye rested on the Marchese for an instant, as he sat amid the flowers in his carriage, to avoid seeing that there was

something wrong with him—that he was very unlike his usual self. And every eye, as the carriages passed each other in the long procession, forming two lines as one passed down the street while the other moved in the contrary direction, did rest on him. But it never for an instant entered into the head of a single human being there, to guess at anything like the real cause of the change in the Marchese.

"Time begins to tell on the Marchese; he takes too much out of himself; always busy—no rest—a bad thing!" said one.

"The Marchese Lamberto looks knocked up with this carnival. Quite time for him that Lent was come," said another.

"The fact is that the Marchese is growing old, and he wants more rest. He has not a minute to himself,—too many irons in the fire at once," said a third.

"I dare say he has been worried out of his life in getting this new opera put upon the stage. You'll see he'll be all right enough at the ball to-morrow night."

"Is she in the Corso—La Lalli?"

"*Altro.* I should think so—and looking so lovely. What a woman she is!"

"Whereabouts is she?"

"About twenty carriages further ahead. You'll see her presently, when we are near the turn, sitting buried up to her waist nearly in flowers—a regular Flora, and such a representative as the Goddess never had before."

"Who has she got with her in her carriage?" asked the first speaker. "I expected to have seen the Marchesino Ludovico there, but he is with the Conte Leandro, in one of the Castelmare carriages."

"*Che!* catch her compromising herself in any such manner. I wonder how much some of our friends would have given to have the place beside her to-day? But not a bit of it: she has got the old man she calls her father with her."

"Funny, isn't it? I wonder what her game is?"

"Simply to work hard at her vocation, and make as much money as she can, I take it. Probably you would find, if you got at the truth, some animal of a *baritono robusto*, who owns the Diva's heart, and for whom she works and slaves."

"*Poverina!* there are the Castelmare carriages coming round again."

The manner of an Italian "Corso" is this: A certain street, or streets—the most adapted to the

exigencies of the case that the city can supply—is selected for the purpose; and when the line of carriages reaches the end of this, it turns and proceeds back again to the other end; turns again, and so on. Thus, at each turn, every carriage in the line meets every other once in each circuit.

The second Castelmare carriage, in which the Marchese Ludovico and Leandro Lombardoni were sitting, was following next after that occupied by the Marchese Lamberto and his sister-in-law; and thus each carriage in the line proceeding in a contrary direction to them, passed first the Marchese Lamberto and then his nephew. The carriage occupied by the latter was a wholly open one with a low back. But that in which the Marchese Lamberto sat, though also an open carriage, and entirely so in front, had a half roof at the back, so that it was not so conveniently adapted as the other for seeing those following it as well as those preceding it.

The Marchese and his sister-in-law threw bouquets into almost every carriage that passed them; and the stock with which they had started was soon very much diminished. But one specially magnificent and large bouquet, which conspicuously occupied the centre of the front seat of the carriage, was evidently reserved.

Everybody who saw it knew very well for whom that was intended. Of course it was for none other than the Diva of the theatre. And the known interest which the Marchese took in such matters, his musical fanaticism, and the large share he had had in bringing La Lalli to Ravenna, made it quite natural, and a matter of course, that he should pay her such a compliment.

Presently he descried her in the opposite string of carriages, coming towards him. Her carriage was an entirely open one, and she sate in it, with old Quinto Lalli by her side, literally, as one observer had said, half buried in flowers. And most assuredly neither the labours nor the dissipations of the carnival, nor time, nor care, nor any other circumstance, had dimmed the lustre of her beauty, or lessened the verve and spirit of enjoyment with which she took her part in the pageant. She was brilliant with vivacity, beauty, and happiness.

The Marchese might have been seen, had anybody been observing him closely at the moment, to turn visibly paler as her carriage approached his. As far as any clear thought had been in his mind, or any power of thinking possible to him, his latest idea in reference to her had been a desperate resolve that he

would never speak to her again. And now, again, as he saw her, in a new avatar of loveliness, he once again knew that to keep such a resolution was above his power.

What he had to do at the moment was to be done, in any case, with the best grace he might. Taking the huge mass of skilfully-arranged flowers in both hands, as her carriage came opposite to his, he leaned out as far as he could, and Quinto Lalli, who sat on the side nearest to him, stretched out to meet him, and then handed the offering to the Goddess. She smiled brilliantly and bowed low, sending a coquettish, sidelong glance of private thanks under eyelashes as she bent her graceful neck.

The carriages rolled on, and passed each other; and there rushed into the Marchese's head a sudden pulse of blood, which turned his previous pallor into a dusky crimson, and seemed to make all the scene swim before his eyes. Partly to hide the evidences of the emotion of which he was conscious, and partly because he felt as if he needed the support, he threw himself back into the corner of the carriage, turning himself away from the scene in front of it as though to shelter his face from the sun that was then so low in the sky as to begin to throw its

slanting rays under the hoods of the carriages. This position, as it chanced, brought the Marchese's eye to bear on the little glass window made in the back of the hood of the carriage, after the old-fashioned manner of coach-building.

And what he saw through the little window was this.

A something—a white paper packet, it looked like—was in the act of being thrown to the Diva's carriage from that immediately behind his own, in which, it will be remembered, were his nephew and the Conte Leandro; and the Goddess herself was leaning far out of her carriage in the act of throwing a bouquet to the Marchese Ludovico. The Marchese Lamberto also saw the magnificent flowers he had himself just given to Bianca roll from her carriage on to the pavement,—an accident caused by the movement of her person as she leaned forward to throw her flowers to the other carriage.

With what an added torment to the hell that raged within him the unfortunate Marchese returned from that miserable Corso to his palazzo, may be well imagined.

Nevertheless, there had been as little meaning in what he had seen as there often is in many

things that make the madness of a jealous man's jealousy.

With the white paper packet—for such it in truth was—the Marchese Ludovico had nothing whatever to do. It had been thrown by the poet Leandro, and contained an attempt to improve the occasion after a fashion, such as he hoped must draw some reply from the Diva. Bianca had taken the opportunity—somewhat coquettishly, but according to the laws and customs of such occasions, quite permissibly—to pay Ludovico the compliment in the eye of all Ravenna of throwing some flowers because she liked him, and because she chose to mark the fact that she threw none during all the Corso to anybody else. She would have done the same if it had so happened that it had been in front of the Marchese Lamberto's carriage instead of behind it; but, of course, to the passion-blinded brain of the latter, this circumstance made all the difference.

As to the rolling of his own superb bouquet on the pavement, it had been quite accidental, and much regretted by Bianca. To recover anything of the kind on such an occasion is, it must be understood, quite out of the question. Any such fallen treasure

—and half the things thrown do fall short of the hands for which they are meant—becomes the instant prey of the small boys who throng the streets, and are constantly on the look-out for such windfalls around the carriages.

CHAPTER III.

"LA SONNAMBULA."

It may be easily imagined that the Marchese returned from the Corso very little disposed to take any pleasure in the treat to which all Ravenna was looking forward, and which he would have enjoyed more than any one else under other circumstances—the performance at the theatre on that Sunday evening. Nevertheless, the duty of attending it had to be done. All Ravenna would have been astonished, and have wanted to "know the reason why," if the Marchese had been absent from his box on such an evening. "Society" expected it of him that he should be there, and he had been all his life doing everything that "society" expected of him; besides, his presence there really was needed, and poor little Ercole Stadione would have despaired

inconsolably if he had been deprived, on such an occasion, of the support of his great friend and patron.

But if none of these reasons had existed—if the Marchese, when he reached the shelter of his own roof after that horrible Corso, had been entirely free to go to bed and escape the necessity of facing the eyes of all the world of Ravenna, which seemed to him to be from hour to hour growing into a more terrible ordeal, would he have *gone* to bed and abstained from attending the theatre ?

It might have been very confidently predicted that he would not have done so. He began, in an unreasoning animal-like sort of way, to recognize the fact that every hour that he spent away from this woman was bare, barren, and of no value to him at all. He was conscious that he could be said to live only in her presence. He was beginning to give himself up as a lost man, and to acquiesce, half-stunned and stupid, in a fatality which he could not struggle against.

And now he was longing—burning not only to have his eyes on her again, but to speak to her. He would have plenty of opportunities of doing so at the theatre in the green-room, or in her dressing-room,

and every minute seemed to him an age till he could find such an opportunity.

If he had been asked at that minute—if he had himself asked of his own mind—what he meant to do —to what future he was looking, whether he meant to marry La Lalli or to give her up, he would probably have repudiated either alternative with equal violence. His mind was in a state of chaos; and what was to come in any future, except the most immediate one, he had become incapable of considering. Now he was going to see, to hear, to breathe the same atmosphere with her again, and to go through the wretched task of striving to behave as usual, and look as usual in the eyes of all Ravenna.

The performance was to commence at half-past eight o'clock, and the Marchese, reaching the theatre nearly half-an-hour before that time, found Bianca sufficiently nearly dressed for him to be admitted to her dressing-room. She was putting the finishing touches to the platting of her magnificent hair, after the fashion of a Swiss village-girl, for the completion of her toilette as Amina. He thought that, in this new costume, she looked more irresistibly attractive than he had yet seen her.

"Bianca," he said, as soon as her dresser had

left her, and shut the door, "you have made me so miserable to-day. I must tell you openly at once what is in my heart. I saw, to-day, at the Corso—by no means intending to look at all at your carriage after it had passed mine—I saw my poor flowers thrown away by you, while you were throwing a bouquet to my nephew and receiving from him something thrown in return. Bianca, is that the conduct of a woman who has the very same morning accepted the hand of another man? Bianca, I warn you to beware; you do not know what such a love as mine, if it should discover itself to be betrayed, might be capable of."

"Marchese, do not look at me in that way; you frighten me, and what have I done? It is all a mistake, entirely a mistake!" said the poor Diva, really frightened at the manner of the Marchese.

"Did I not see you throw the flowers I had given you from your carriage; evidently for the purpose of gratifying another person?"

"Oh, Marchese! how is it possible that such a thought should enter into your head? Ah, how little you know. If you knew how I had grieved over the loss of the beautiful bouquet that had come from your hand! It fell from the carriage by accident;

and it was snatched up, and a boy ran off with it, all in a moment; I would have given anything to get it back again."

"But how came the accident? It was caused by your leaning out of your carriage to throw a bouquet yourself."

"Yes, exactly so; to the Marchese Ludovico. He was the only person to whom I threw a bouquet in all the Corso."

"And why should you throw one to him?"

"To him,—to your nephew? Why not, I should not have thought of doing so to another. But to him——"

"And what was it, pray, that he threw to you? I wonder whether he thought, too, that he should not dream of throwing anything to anybody except you."

"The Marchese Ludovico threw nothing to me. Just at the same moment that troublesome idiot, the Conte Leandro, threw a packet into the carriage. I have not even opened it; you may have it unopened the next time you are in the Strada di Porta Sisi, if you like. No doubt it contains some of his charming verses. It is not kind of you, Signor Marchese, to say such things, or to have such thoughts in your head!" said Bianca, turning away her face and

putting her handkerchief to her eyes. "And now," she added, you have made my eyes all red just before I have to go on the stage!"

Of course once again the unhappy Marchese was entirely routed, and the Diva was victorious.

"Forgive me, Bianca," he whispered; "I think only of you from the morning to the evening, and from the evening to the morning again. And it would be impossible for any man to love, as I love you, without a liability to jealousy. I *am* jealous of your love, Bianca!"

"But it is wonderful that you should not perceive how little cause you have for any such feeling. Oh, Marchese, how can you doubt me? Surely you must have seen and known how entirely my love is yours. You must not wring your poor Bianca's heart by such cruel suspicions."

And then the three knocks, which announced the raising of the curtain, were heard; and the Marchese again murmuring a request to be forgiven, as he kissed her hand, hurried away to take his place in his box.

The house was already nearly full, for the occasion was a notable one; and the opera was new to Ravenna; and everybody wished to hear every

note of it. The Marchese Ludovico was not, however, in the Castelmare box, when his uncle reached it, but he came in a minute afterwards. He had been up to the upper tier of boxes to say a word to Paolina and her old friend, who were in the box he had provided for them, which was on the opposite side of the house to the Castelmare box, and exactly over that in the "piano nobile" in which were the Marchesa Anna Lanfredi, and her niece the Contessa Violante.

There was a little noise in the house of people not yet seated during the opening chorus of villagers; but when the *prima donna* came on the stage as Amina, after the prolonged and repeated rounds of applause, which greeted her appearance, had subsided, a pin's fall might have been heard in the theatre.

The Marchese Ludovico had joined cordially and boisterously, and the Marchese Lamberto more moderately, in the applause which had saluted the entrance of the Diva; and after that the latter had placed himself in the corner of the box, with his back to the audience, and his face towards the stage, and with an opera-glass at his eyes, he sat perfectly still, feeding his passion with every glance, every change

of feature, and every movement of the woman who had enthralled him.

Then came the famous song of Amina, the happy village-bride about to be married on the morrow to her lover—the tenor of course. The Diva sang it admirably, and acted it equally well. The purest girlish innocence was expressed in every trait of her features and manifested itself in every gesture and every movement. The perfect, trusting, happy love of a fresh and innocent heart could have had no better representative.

The recitative, "*Care compagne*," &c., addressed to the assembled villagers, fell from her lips with a purity of enunciation that made each syllable seem like a note from a silver bell. And then the air, "*Come per me sereno*," held the house entranced till the final note of it. And then burst forth such a frantic shout of applause and delight as can be heard only in an Italian theatre.

Ludovico leant far out of the stage-box in which he sat, and joined vociferously in the plaudits with both hand and voice. But the Marchese remained quiet in his corner, with his face half-shaded by his hand, conscious as he was that the expression of it might need hiding from the others in the box. He

need not have heeded them; for their attention was too exclusively occupied with the stage for them to expend any of it on him. Had it been otherwise his hand, covering the lower half of his face, would not have sufficed to conceal his emotion.

Now again the hot fit of his love was in the ascendant. Never had Bianca more thoroughly captivated him. Never had it seemed to him less possible to live without her. What to him were all these dull and empty blockheads for whom he had hitherto lived, and who were now—the foul fiend seize them!—sharing with him the delight of seeing and hearing her for the last time. Yes, it should be for the last time. He would make her his, all his own; and carry her far away from all that could remind either her or himself of their past lives. And then a scowl of displeasure came over his face as his glance lighted on his nephew's noisy and unrestrained manifestations of enthusiastic admiration.

Presently, towards the end of the first act, came the duet between Amina and her lover, who has been made causelessly jealous, and Bianca sang the pretty lines—

"Son, mio bene, del zeffiro amante,
Perchè ad esso il tuo nome confido.
Amo il sol, perchè teco il divido,
Amo il rio, perchè l' onda ti da,"

with a sweetness of expression perfectly irresistible.

The Marchese in his corner, half-shrouded from the observation of the house by the curtain, which, though undrawn, hung down by the side of the box, but fully facing the stage, was perfectly aware that the singer had specially addressed herself to him; and he felt the full force of the loving rebuke for the unreasonable displeasure he had so recently manifested in her dressing-room. His heart went out towards her; and he felt that if it were to be done that moment, he could have led her to the altar in the face of all Christendom.

At the end of the act the plaudits were again vociferous, and four times was the smiling and triumphant Diva compelled by the calls and clamour of her worshippers to return before the curtain to receive their applause and salute them in return for it.

The Marchese Ludovico again loudly and enthusiastically joined in these manifestations; and then, when they were over, and the noise in the house had subsided, he quietly slipped out of the box, and springing up the stairs which communicated with the upper tier of boxes, entered that occupied by Paolina and the Signora Orsola Steno.

"What did you think of that, Paolina mia?" he said, sitting down by her side, and making the action of applauding with his hands, as he spoke. "Did you ever hear a thing more charmingly sung? Is she not divine?"

"There is no mistaking *your* opinion on the point, at all events, *amico mio*. I never saw anybody manifest such unbounded admiration as you did just now. But the Diva was not thinking of you, I can tell you," said Paolina, with just the slightest possible flavour of pique in her tone.

"Thinking of *me;* I should imagine not indeed. But what upon earth have you got into that dear little head of yours, my Paolina? Did not you think both singing and acting very fine?"

"Certainly I think her voice is perhaps the finest I ever heard in my life; and she is no doubt a great actress — a very great actress; but — she is not *simpatica* to me. I don't know why, but—somehow or other—I don't like her."

"What can you have got into your head, *tesoro mio?* You know nothing of her; you have nothing to do with her except to see and hear her on the stage——"

No; thank heaven! I should not like that she

should come any nearer to my life than that," replied Paolina, with a little shudder.

"Come, Paolina, you must admit that that is being prejudiced and unreasonable," said Ludovico, smiling at her.

"Yes; I suppose it is. But—Ludovico mio, just ask any other woman—any other good woman—in the house; and see if they have not the same feeling. The Contessa Violante, for example—ask her," said Paolina.

"Just because she is splendidly handsome: women cannot be just to each other when that comes in the way. But *you* might afford to be charitable even to so beautiful a creature as the Lalli, my Paolina."

"No, Signor, I won't be bribed by compliments, even from you," she whispered, with a look that showed that the value of the bribe was not unappreciated; "and I think that what you say is unjust to women in general."

"But I wonder what it is then that has prejudiced you against the Lalli?"

"I don't know. Really nothing that I can tell. One feels sometimes what one cannot explain. She is not *simpatica* to me, that is all."

"But what on earth put it into your head, Paolina mia, to say that she was not thinking of me when she was singing her part? Why should she think of me—or of anybody else, except the *primo tenore*, who was singing with her? What is it you mean?' said Ludovico, much puzzled.

"You said she was a very good actress as well as a fine singer," returned Paolina; "and I think she is. This is a capital box for seeing all that goes on on the opposite side of the theatre. And I can tell you who La Lalli *was* thinking of, and who she was singing at during her duet at the end of the act—your uncle, the Marchese Lamberto; and he knew it very well, too."

"What parcel of nonsense have you got into your little brains, Paolina? Sing at the Marchese? Of course they all do; of course they all know that his suffrage is of more importance to them than all the rest of the theatre put together. But as for my idea of—*lo zio*—of all men in the world. Ha, ha, ha! If you had lived in Ravenna instead of Venice all your life, *carina mia*, you would know how infinitely absurd the idea seems of there being anything between the Marchese Lamberto and a stage singer, or of its being possible for him to regard

her in any other light than that of a singing machine."

"I dare say you are right, *caro mio*. Still I can't quite think that the Marchese would look at any one of the fiddles quite as I saw him look at her," said Paolina.

And then the immense interval, which occurs between one act and another in Italian theatres, and which is tolerated with perfect contentment by Italian audiences, came to an end; and Ludovico hurried down to take his place again in the Castelmare box.

The next point in the opera which excited the special enthusiasm of the house was the impassioned finale to the second act, in which Amina on her knees strives to convince her lover of her innocence of having ever harboured a thought inconsistent with entire devotion to him. She sang as if her whole soul were in her words; and the entire theatre was electrified by the power of her acting; the entire theatre, with the exception of one intelligent and observant little face in a box on the upper tier, exactly opposite to that of the Marchese Lamberto.

From that vantage-ground of observation Paolina saw perfectly well both the singer on the stage and

the Marchese in the box; and again felt sure that the actress was specially addressing herself with an implied meaning to the latter; and that he was aware that she was doing so. She felt no doubt that the motive for this was exactly that to which Ludovico had attributed it. It was important to the Diva to flatter and make a friend of so powerful a theatrical patron as the Marchese; and she took this very objectionable method, Paolina thought, of attaining that end. Paolina thought nothing more than this; but, nevertheless, it made her conceive a dislike for the Diva greater, perhaps, than the cause would seem to justify.

The interval between the second and the third act Ludovico thought himself obliged to pass in the box of the Marchese Anna Lanfredi, in which Violante was sitting with her aunt. There, too, he found the ladies not quite disposed to be as frantically enthusiastic in their praises of the singer as the whole male part of the audience. The Marchesa Lanfredi thought that La Lalli was nothing at all in comparison with some singer who had charmed all Bologna some forty years before. And Violante, admitting that she had an exquisite voice and perfect method, confessed much as Paolina had done, that she did not quite like her, she hardly knew why.

In the third act, the song sung by the sleep-walker in her state of unconsciousness—"*Ah non credea mirarti,*"—was a great success. And most fascinatingly lovely the Diva looked in her white night-dress, with her wreath of rich auburn tresses hanging in luxuriant curls around her shoulders.

Shortly after this had been sung a liveried servant entered the Castelmare box, bearing a most superb bouquet of choice flowers, tied with a long streamer of broad rose-coloured ribbon, and deposited it on the front of the box.

And then came the joyful finale "*Ah non giunge.*" And in that the Diva seemed to surpass herself. It was a passionate carol of love, and joy, and triumph, in which she seemed to pour the whole force and energy of her soul into the words and sounds that told the truth, the entirety, the perfection of her love, and the overwhelming happiness the recognition of it by its object gave her.

For many minutes the vociferous applause continued. The stage was covered with flowers flung from all sides of the house. The Marchese Lamberto whispered a word or two to Ludovico; and then the latter, leaning far out of the box, presented the magnificent bouquet to Bianca, who was smiling and

thanking the public for their plaudits by repeated curtsies, and who came for it to the side of the stage. She made a very low and graceful curtsey to Ludovico, as she took it from his hand; but her eyes thanked the Marchese Lamberto, who still remained close in his corner, for the gift.

The fact was that he was too much moved by violent and contending emotions to dare to trust himself to hand the flowers himself. He knew that he was shaking in every limb; and, therefore, had told his nephew to give the bouquet; which, indeed, it was quite a matter of course that a successful *prima donna* should receive from that box on such an occasion.

Again and again the curtain had to be raised after it had descended in obedience to the cries of the spectators, who were determined to make the Diva's triumph complete. Again and again she had to step back on the stage and make yet one more bow and smile—yet one more gracious smile.

During this delay the Marchese Lamberto slipped from his box and made his way behind the scenes.

"Can you feel as Bianca what you can so divinely express as Amina?" he whispered in her ear as

he gave her his arm to lead her to her carriage at the stage-door.

"Try me as Amina was tried; and reward me as Amina was rewarded, and then see," she replied in the same tone.

And so ended Bianca Lalli's Carnival engagement at Ravenna.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MARCHESE LAMBERTO'S CORRESPONDENCE.

The next morning—the morning of the Monday after the gala performance at the theatre—the post brought to the Palazzo Castelmare a letter from Rome, before the Marchese had left his chamber. The servant took it to his master's room, found him still in bed, though awake, and left it on the table by his bedside.

The Marchese Lamberto was, and had been all his life, far too busy a man to be a late riser. Italians, indeed, who do nothing all day long, are often very early risers. Their climate leads them to be so. They sleep during hours which are less available for being out of doors—for your Italian idler passes very little of his day in his own home—and they are up and out during the delicious hours of the early morning. But the Marchese Lamberto, whose

days were filled with the multiplicity of occupations and affairs that have been described in a previous chapter, was wont, at all times of the year, to rise early.

On the present occasion, a sleepless night—and such nights, also, were a new phenomenon in the Marchese's life—might have been a reason for his being late. But he was not sleeping when his servant took the letter in to him. The frame of mind in which he returned from the theatre has been described. It lasted till he fell into a feverish sleep, soon after going to his bed.

The dreams that made such sleep anything but rest may be easily guessed. He was startled from them by the fancy that the kisses of Bianca burned his lips; that it was a scorching flame, that he was pressing in his arms, the contact of which turned all his blood to liquid fire.

He slept no more during the night. And the good that had seemed to him, as he sate in his box at the opera, more desirable than all the other goods the world could give, seemed good no longer; seemed, in the dark stillness of his night-thoughts, like a painted bait, with which the arch-tempter was luring him to his ruin and destruction.

Restlessly turning on his bed with a deep sigh, and pressing his hot hand to his yet hotter brow, he took the letter that had been brought him, and saw that it was from his Roman friend and correspondent, Monsignore Paterini:

"ILLUS^MO SIGNOR MARCHESE E MIO BUONO E COLEND^MO AMICO," the letter ran—"Seeing that the subject of my letter is matter adapted rather to Carnival than to Lenten tide, I hasten to write so that it may reach your lordship before the festive season is over. That your friends in Rome are never forgetful of one, who so eminently deserves all their best thoughts and good wishes, I trust I need not tell you. But in this our Rome, where so many interests are the unceasing care of so many powerful friends and backers, it needs such merit as that of your lordship to make the efforts of friends successful.

"Understand, then, that his Holiness has been kept constantly aware of all that Ravenna—the welfare of which ancient and noble city is especially dear to him—owes to your constant and intelligent efforts for the advancement of true civilization and improvement, as distinguished from all that innovators, uninfluenced by the spirit of religion, vainly boast as

such. Specially, our Holy Father has been pleased by the energy, tact, and truly well-directed zeal, with which you have succeeded in bringing to a satisfactory conclusion the thorny and difficult business of the Spighi property, on which all the welfare of our well-beloved Sisters in Christ the Augustines of St. Barnaba so greatly depends. The lady superior of that well-deserving house is, as you are aware, the sister of his Eminence the Cardinal Lattoli; and so signal a service rendered in that direction is, as I need hardly tell your lordship, not likely to be forgotten.

"It is under these circumstances that I have the great satisfaction of having it in my power to inform your lordship, that it is the gracious purpose of our Holy Father to mark his approbation and satisfaction at the conduct of your illustrious lordship in this matter, in a manner that, while it manifests to the whole world the care of his Holiness for every portion of the dominions of the Holy Church, will, I doubt not, be highly gratifying to yourself at the present time, and will redound to the future glory and distinction of your noble family. It is, in a word, the intention of the Holy Father to confer on your lordship the Grand Cross of the Most Noble Order of the

Santo Spirito. And it is further the benignant purpose and wish of his Holiness to present you with this most honourable mark of his approbation with his own sovereign hand.

"We may therefore hope—myself and your numerous other friends in this city—to see you here before long. Doubtless the tidings, which I have been anxious to be the first to give you, will be very shortly communicated to you in a more official manner. I fancy, indeed, that I shall not have been able to be much beforehand with the official announcement. Make your arrangements, then, I beseech you, to give us as long a visit as you can steal from the grave cares of watching over the interests of your beloved Ravenna. There are many here who are anxious to renew their acquaintance, and, if he will permit them to say so, their friendship with the Marchese di Castelmare. And, if I may venture to do so, my dear friend, I would, before closing my letter, whisper that, with due care and a little activity, the present favour of our Holy Father may be but the earnest of other things.

"The future, however, is in God's hands, and man is but as grass. Nevertheless, as far as it is permissible to judge of the human agencies by which

the Heavenly Providence brings about its ends, I should say that your Legate, his Eminence the Cardinal Marliani, was, of all the present Fathers of the Church, one of the most deserving of our regards and respect. Should you have a fitting opportunity of allowing his Eminence to become aware how strongly such have always been my sentiments, and how unceasingly I endeavour to impress them on others, I should esteem it as a favour. It is well that merit even so exalted as his should know that it is appreciated.

"Omit not, my friend, to offer to the Marchese Ludovico, your nephew, the expression of my most distinguished regard and respect; and believe me, Illus° Signor Marchese, of your Excellency the devoted friend and most obedient servant,

"GIUSEPPE PATERINI."

Before the Marchese had read the wordy epistle of his correspondent half through, he raised himself briskly to an upright sitting posture in his bed, his head was lifted with a proud movement from its drooping attitude, and an expression of gratified pride and pleasure came into his eyes. The much-coveted distinction which was now, he was told, to be his,

had long been the object of his eager ambition. And the manner in which it was to be conferred on him—the attitude he should stand in with reference to his friend the Cardinal Legate—all contributed to make the occasion gratifying to him.

He rang his bell sharply for his servant, and said he would get up at once.

The valet said that there was a servant from the Legate's palace below, with a letter for the Marchese from the Cardinal—that, fearing his master was not well, and might be getting a little sleep, he, the valet, had been unwilling to bring the letter up; but that the man was waiting his Excellency's pleasure, as he had been ordered to ask for an answer.

Doubtless this was the official communication of which Paterini spoke, or the forerunner of it. The Marchese desired his man to bring him the Cardinal's letter directly.

Yes; the pleasant duty having fallen to the lot of the Cardinal of making a communication to the Marchese, which would doubtless be highly gratifying to him, his Eminence was anxious to seize the earliest opportunity of performing so agreeable a task; and would be happy to see the Marchese at one o'clock

that day, if that hour suited his lordship's convenience.

"Delighted to have the honour of waiting on his Eminence at the hour named."

The Marchese put the two letters on his toilet-table, and proceeded to dress. They were large letters. That from Monsieur Paterini was written on a sheet of foolscap paper, and addressed in a large strong hand, with the word RAVENNA in letters half an inch high. That from the Cardinal was contained in a large square envelope, sealed with a huge seal bearing his Eminence's arms under a Cardinal's hat, with its long many-tailed tassels hanging down on either side.

What a triumph would be this journey to Rome. What a yet greater triumph the return from it. The Legate would certainly hold a special state reception to welcome him back, and give him an opportunity of showing the new order to all his fellow-citizens. What a proud hour it would be.

The Marchese was indulging in these thoughts, dressing himself the while, and looking every now and then at the two letters lying on his table, when a footman tapped at the door and handed to the valet, who was attending on his master, yet a third epistle.

Unlike the Cardinal's servant, the man who had brought it had simply left it, and gone away without saying anything about an answer.

This third letter did not resemble its two predecessors—at least on the outside—at all. It was a very little letter; not a quarter of the size of either of the others; and the seal wherewith it was sealed was not a tenth of the size of that of his Eminence; also, instead of being white like the Cardinal's, or whity-yellow like the Prelate's, it was rose-coloured, and delicately perfumed. And the superscription, "All' Illm^{mo} Sig^{r} il Sig^{r} Marchese Lamberto di Castelmare," was written in very daintily pretty and delicate small characters; as unmistakably feminine a letter as ever a gentleman received.

The Marchese's face changed visibly as the little missive was put into his hands. Yet he opened it eagerly, and opened his nostrils to the perfume, which exhaled from it, with a greedily sensuous seeming of pleasure.

This letter ran as follows:—

"Dearest and Best,—If you were not indeed and indeed so to me, could I have ever suffered the vow that binds us mutually to each other to have

been uttered?—Dearest and best, I write mainly, I think, for the mere pleasure of addressing you. For I am sure that it is not necessary to ask you to come to me. You can guess how eagerly I wish to—speak to you; to hear from you that you have dismissed for ever those horrid thoughts that you vexed me with at the theatre last night. I longed so to have sung the words I had to utter for your ears—to your ears only: '*Amo il zeffiro, perchè ad esso il tuo nome confido.*' Ah, Lamberto, if you knew how true that is. It is often—how often—the singer's duty to utter on the stage the words of passion. But what a thing it is—a thing I never dreamed before—to feel them as I utter them. The opera did not go badly, did it? I think the success was a legitimate one. But what is any success or any applause now to me, save yours? I felt that I was singing to one only, as one only was in my heart and in my thoughts. Do not let many hours pass before you come to me, my love, my lord! For they go very slowly and heavily, these hours; and as I trace the movement of the tardy hour-hand on the clock, I grow sick with longing, and with hope deferred. Come to me, my dearest and my best. Your own

"BIANCA."

"P.S.—I have mentioned our engagement to no soul save my father; of course you did not wish me to exclude him from our confidence. He is fully worthy of it."

The Marchese sunk down into the chair that stood before his toilet-table, with the little letter in his hand; and his hand shook, and his eyes were dizzy, and there was a buzzy ringing in his ears. And still the perfume from the pink paper rose to his nostrils, and seemed to his fancy as though it were a poison that he had neither the power nor the will to defend himself from.

He had put the little pink note down on the table where the two other letters were, and sat looking at the three. They were manifestly, fatally incompatible. Either the two big letters must be thrown to the winds—they and their contents for ever—together with all thought of honours, high social standing, and admiring respect of the world; or the little pink note must be crushed at once and for ever, and its writer—ah!—made to understand, to begin with, that the Marchese di Castelmare did not know his own mind; that his offer and his plighted word were not to be trusted.

The letters lying there on the table before him, as he sat gazing at them almost without the power of anything that merited to be called thought, represented themselves to his fancy as living agencies of contrasted qualities and powers. The two large missives from his ecclesiastical friends were creditable and useful steeds; harmless, wholesome in blood and nature, big and pacific, apt for service, and good for drawing him on to honour, success, and prosperity The little pink note was a scorpion with a power a thousandfold greater, for its size—a sharp, venomous, noxious power, stinging to the death, yet imparting with its sting a terrible, a fatal delight, an acrid fierce pleasure, which once tasted could not by any mortal strength of resolution be dashed away from the lips.

He took the sweet-scented little paper in his hand and read it through again. And his veins seemed to run with fire as he read. Then for the first time he saw the postscript. It had escaped his notice before.

That old man had been informed that he had offered marriage to the girl he called his daughter and had been accepted.

It might not be so easy to crush the little pink

scorpion note, and liberate himself from the writer of it. Proof? There might be no legal evidence to show that he had ever made such a promise. Yet, to have such an assertion made by Bianca and her father,—to have to deny the fact, knowing it to be true!—he, Lamberto di Castelmare! Great God! what was before him?

Then there was that woman, the servant, too. Might it not well be that she, too, knew the promise he had made; overheard him possibly; set to do so —likely enough! What was he to do?—what was he to do?

Something he must do quickly. The Cardinal Legate was expecting him at one o'clock, and—would it be best to drive Bianca from his mind till afterwards? Go to her he must in the course of the day!

Then, suddenly as a lightning-flash, he saw her before him as he had gazed on her at the theatre overnight in her white night-dress, uttering those words of passionate love—love which she told him was all addressed to him,—which she was pining to speak to him again.

That, then, it was in his power to have, and to have *now*,—now at once. "Ahi, ahi!" he gnashed,

through his ground teeth, closing his eyes as the besieging vision postured itself in every seductive guise before the suggestions of his fancy. Ah, God! what were Cardinals, and Crosses, and place and station, or all the world beside, to one half-hour in those arms?

Come what come might, he would see her first before going to the Cardinal.

Snatching his hat, cane, and gloves, breakfastless as he was, he hurried out of the house half mad with the passion that was consuming him, yet with enough of the old thoughts about him to turn away, on quitting his own door, from the direction of the Porta Sisi, and to seek the goal of his thoughts by the most unfrequented route he could find.

CHAPTER V.

BIANCA AT HOME.

Quinto Lalli and Bianca were sitting together in the parlour of their apartments in the Strada di Porta Sisi, that same Monday morning just after the little pink note had been despatched to the Marchese. Bianca was having her breakfast—a small quantity of black coffee in a drinking-glass, brought, together with a roll of dry bread, from the café. Old Lalli was not partaking of her repast, having previously enjoyed a similar meal, with the addition of a modicum of some horrible alcoholic mixture, called "rhume," poured into the coffee at the café in the next street.

"That will bring him fast enough," said the old man, alluding to the note which had been just despatched. "The game is quite in your own hands,

as I told you from the beginning it would be. That postscript was a capital thought."

The postscript in question, which, it may be remembered, had not added to the pleasure the billet had given the Marchese, had been added at the suggestion of old Lalli himself.

"I would rather not have written it," replied Bianca, peevishly. "It looked too much like putting the screw on—I don't like it."

"Be reasonable, *bambina mia*, whatever you are. How, in the name of all the Saints, do you imagine that you are to become Marchesa di Castelmare without putting the screw on—and that pretty sharply too? The man is as thoroughly caught as ever man was caught by a woman; and I tell you, therefore, that the game is in your own hands. But you don't suppose that he is burningly eager to solicit the honour of your alliance, *che diamine?* "

"Don't, Quinto; don't go on in that way. I tell you I hate it all," returned Bianca.

"*Cara mia*, you are in an irrational humour this morning. Do you like the old game better? It don't pay, *bambina mia*, as you have found out; and, above all, it won't last. But I am sure you have reason to be satisfied with your success this season in

any way. I never heard you sing better in my life than you did last night; and, to say the truth, these people seemed to appreciate it."

"I tell you, I hate it all—all—all!" said Bianca, as she swallowed the last drop of her coffee, and threw herself on the sofa in an attitude of languor and ennui.

"You are unreasonable, Bianca,—you are not like yourself this morning; I don't know what is come to you. What in the world *do* you like, or what do you want?" said the old man, looking at her with a puzzled air.

"Did you see the Marchese Ludovico in a box on the right-hand side on the second tier with that Venetian girl, the artist?"

"The Marchese Ludovico was in the left-hand stage-box with his uncle."

"Of course he was; but I mean between the acts. I saw him from the wing by the side of that girl with her face the colour of mahogany, and her half-alive look. I hate the look of her, and I know she hates me!"

Old Quinto looked at his pupil curiously for a minute before he replied to her.

"What *do* you mean, Bianca mia?" he said, at

last; "and what, in the name of all the Saints, is the Venetian girl to you, or you to her? Did you ever speak to her? Why should she hate you?"

"I tell you, she does. We women can always see those things without needing to be told them; and she knows, you may be very sure, that I hate her."

"But why? What is she to you?" reiterated the old man.

"You asked me, just now, what I wanted. I want, if you must know, what I can never have—what the Venetian girl last night was getting."

"And what was she getting? I don't understand you, upon my soul!" said Quinto, staring at her, and utterly puzzled.

"What was she getting? Love!—that was what she was getting! Ludovico loves her," said Bianca, raising herself on her elbow, and speaking with fierce bitterness.

"Tu, tu, tu, tu, tu, tu!" whistled Quinto, between his pursed-up lips. "But I thought, *bambina mia*, that you were going to love the Marchese Lamberto, and be a good wife to him, and all the rest of it, according to the rules and practices of the best-regulated domestic family circles; and I—

I was so rejoiced to hear it," said the old reprobate, casting up his eyes and hands.

"Don't, Quinto; don't talk in that manner, or you'll drive me beyond myself. I can't bear it."

"But did you not say that you loved the Marchese Lamberto?" persisted Quinto, dropping his mocking tone, however.

"I said that I liked him better than any of the men I have known; that I admired him as a fine and noble gentleman; that I would be a good and true wife to him,—and should love him," she added, with a burst of bitterness, "better than he ever will, or can, love me."

"Well, come now, *bambina mia*. If you think that the Marchese is not enough in love with you, you must have a strong appetite, indeed, and be very hard to content. Why, if there ever was a man thoroughly caught, fascinated——"

"Bah! Love! Ludovico loves the Venetian," said Bianca, with an expressive emphasis on the verb.

"Ludovico, again! I protest I don't understand you, Bianca. But there, when a man has come to my age he don't expect ever to understand a woman. You did not want Ludovico, as you call him, to love you, did you?"

"No: but——"

And Bianca stopped short, and seemed to fall into a sort of reverie.

"But what? If you mean that you wanted to have the uncle for a husband, and the nephew for a lover, that is intelligible enough. The game would have been a dangerous one. But there is no reason why you should not say it plainly between friends."

"I tell you, Quinto, I won't hear you speak to me in that tone," said Bianca, turning on him fiercely, and with flashing eyes. "Did I ever do anything to attract him?" she added,—"did I try to make him love me? Do you think that the Venetian would have stood in the way if I had chosen to do so? I never did! I meant, if the Marchese would make me his wife, to be true and loyal to him; though he himself seems to think it impossible that I should be so. You know that I have never attempted to attract Ludovico in any way."

"Very well then; let his Venetian have him in peace," said Quinto, shrugging his shoulders.

"Why, then, does that girl hate me as she does? What harm have I ever done her?" returned Bianca.

"Why should you think she does hate you?" expostulated Quinto.

"I have told you that I saw it. I saw it in her eyes when Ludovico was handing me the bouquet;—which he only did because his uncle told him to do it. She would have blasted me to death with her look at that moment if she could have done it;—I have a good mind—a very good mind——"

"Be guided by me this once for the last time, as you have so often been before, *bambina mia*," said Quinto, who thought that he now understood the real state of the case; "make sure of your own game first. Make all safe with the Marchese Lamberto. When you are the Marchesa di Castelmare it will be time to take any revenge on the Venetian you please."

"Ah—h—h—h!" sighed Bianca, shaking her head with an expression of disgust; "you understand nothing about it, Quinto; you can't—of course you can't. *Già*," she continued, after a pause of thought; "yes, I could take from her, poor fool, what she has; but could I, Bianca Lalli, take it and keep it for myself? Ah me, it is weary work! You might as well go and *flaner*, Quinto; for I must dress ready for the Marchese, in case he comes this morning."

"He'll come sure enough," said Quinto, as he prepared to leave the room.

"It's quite time, then, that I made myself ready to receive him," returned Bianca, getting up from the sofa.

"*Amo il zeffiro, perchè a lui suo nome confido,*" she sang, as she turned listlessly to go to her chamber; and despite what she had said—and said with perfect sincerity to her adopted father—it may be feared that the *suo* did not refer in the singer's mind to the Marchese Lamberto.

Quinto Lalli was in the act of shutting the sitting-room door behind him, when the outer door of the apartment opened and Ludovico appeared in the door-way. He was the very last man whom Quinto, with the ideas in his head which the above conversation with Bianca had put into it, would have wished to see there. And perhaps there was something in his manner of meeting the visitor that enabled the Marchesino to perceive that he was not just then welcome.

"A thousand pardons," he said, in an easy, careless manner, "for coming at so indiscreetly early an hour; but I could not refrain from just saying one word to the Signorina Bianca on her last night's triumph, and I shall have no opportunity of seeing her later in the day."

"Bianca," called out Quinto, re-opening the door he was closing, and putting his head back into the room, "here's the Marchese Ludovico wishes to speak to you." If the old man had not been a little bit out of humour with his adopted daughter he would probably have found some excuse for getting rid of the inopportune visitor.

"Pray let the Signor Marchese come in," returned Bianca, turning back from the door of her bed-room, rather to the surprise of Signor Quinto; —and Ludovico passed on into the sitting-room as the old man went out and shut the outer door behind him.

Bianca, as she had said, had been about to dress to receive the Marchese Lamberto; and Ludovico thus caught her (really surprised this time) in her morning toilette. But there was nothing in her dress to prevent her from being with propriety presentable, or, indeed, to prevent her from looking very charming in her dishabille. Nevertheless, she did not intend, as we have seen, to present herself without further adornment to the Marchese Lamberto; and it was not without a certain feeling of bitterness at her heart that she said to herself, "What does it signify?" as she cast a glance at her looking-glass before

stepping back into the sitting-room to receive her visitor.

"Really, Signora, I don't know how to apologize sufficiently for thus breaking in upon you," said Ludovico, coming forward to meet her; "but I could not refrain from calling to say one word of congratulation. Can you forgive me?"

"I hardly know whether I can," said Bianca, half pouting and half laughing, and looking wholly beautiful; "to be seen when they are not fit to be seen is an offence which we others, women, find it difficult to forgive, you know."

"But that is an offence which, in the nature of things, cannot be committed against the Signora Bianca Lalli," retorted Ludovico, with a low bow, half earnest and half in fun, and a look of admiration that was entirely sincere. "But the fact is," he continued, "that I really was impatient to be the first to make you my compliments on last night's immense success. To tell you that I never heard a part sung as you sang that of Amina last night would, perhaps, appear to you to be saying little. But I do assure you the whole city is saying that there never was anything like it. It was superb! Perfect! Perhaps the praise of all Ravenna is not

worth very much to one who has had that of all Italy. But, at all events, my uncle is a competent judge—and he is not an easy one. And I do assure you he was moved as I never saw him moved by music before."

"He is very good—too kind to me. He was good enough to see me to my carriage at the theatre last night; and he said some word that makes me think he purposes doing me the honour of coming here to give me the advantage of his criticism on last night's performance," said Bianca, who was anxious to let her visitor understand the desirability of avoiding being caught there by his uncle.

"Yes, I am sure he would not fail to bring his tribute of admiration this morning," returned Ludovico, carelessly; "but he will not be here yet awhile. He is an early man in general, *lo zio;* but he has not been well latterly. You must have seen yourself, Signorina, how changed he is since you have known him. I really begin to be uneasy about him. You must surely have observed how ill he is looking."

"I am so grieved to hear you say so. Of course any change must be far more evident to those who have known him all his life. But I should have said

that I had rarely or never seen so remarkably young-looking a man for his years. The Marchese happened to tell me once that he is fifty or not far from it. It seemed to me impossible to believe it," said Bianca, who understood perfectly well how and why it came to pass that the Marchese should latterly be a changed man.

"Three months ago he might have well passed for five-and-thirty; but, *per Bacco*, he looks his years now every day of them — and more, too, *il povero zio*."

"Nay, Signor Ludovico, I think your regard for your uncle makes you think him worse than he is. I thought he was looking very well at the theatre last night," replied Bianca, knowing nothing more to the purpose to say.

"At the theatre. Ah! perhaps. He was pleased and excited. I did not specially remark him last night. But, the truth is, I am not easy about him."

"I feel very much persuaded, Signor Ludovico, that you are alarming yourself unnecessarily. Your fears are excited by your affection for your uncle. I doubt whether many nephews in your position, Signor Marchese, would feel as much anxiety about

the health of an uncle whose heirs they were; not that I mean, of course, Signor, to insinuate that you are dependent on your uncle," added Bianca, who felt considerable curiosity to know how matters stood in the Castelmare family in this respect.

"Faith, though, I *am* dependent on him," returned Ludovico, with the most careless frankness. "I have not a bajocco in the world but what comes to me from him. But *lo zio* is more generous than uncles often are to their nephews who are to be their heirs. And I am in no hurry to succeed to him, I assure you."

"I am sure that would not be in your nature in any case, Signor Ludovico," returned Bianca; "but there is some excuse for those being in a hurry whose future depends on the caprice of old people," she added, fishing for further information.

"But my future does depend upon his caprice—in one way, at all events. Suppose my uncle should take it into his head to marry, and have a family. There is nothing to prevent him. Many an older man than he by a great deal has done so. And if that were to happen, there is not a beggar in all Ravenna who is a poorer man than I should be. Only that *lo zio* is about the most unlikely man to

marry in all Italy, it is a thing that might happen any day."

"Why should the Signor Marchese be so unlikely to marry? One would say, to look at him, that it was not such an unlikely thing. Suppose some designing woman were to make the attempt?"

"There does not exist the woman who could have the faintest shadow of success in such an enterprise, Signora. If you could tell how often the thing has been tried! He is seasoned, *lo zio* is. Besides, he never was a man given much to falling in love at any time of his life. I don't think he is much an admirer of the sex, to tell you the truth. No; there is no fear of *that*."

There was a silence of some minutes, and Bianca seemed to have fallen into a reverie; till, suddenly raising her eyes, which had fallen beneath their lashes, while she had been busy with her thoughts, she said, looking up archly into Ludovico's face:

"*Your* attention, at all events, was not so fully occupied by the performance last night, Signor, but that you had plenty of thoughts and eyes at command for other matters."

"What do you mean, Signora? I am sure I was not only an attentive but a delighted listener,"

said he, while the tell-tale blood flushed his cheeks.

"Ah! I saw which way your glances and thoughts were wandering. We artists see more things in the *salle* than you of the world before the foot-lights think for. A very pretty little brunette, in No. 10 on the upper tier, was quite equally aware of the direction of the Marchese Ludovico's thoughts and looks."

"You might have seen not only my thoughts but me myself in the same box, Signora, if you could have continued your observations after the curtain was down. The lady you saw there is one for whom I have the highest possible regard," said Ludovico, with a very slight shade of hauteur quite foreign to his usual manner, in his tone.

It was very slightly marked, but not so slightly as to escape the notice of Bianca, who perfectly well understood it and the meaning of it.

"I dare say she well deserves it; she looks as if she did," said the Diva, with a pensive air, and a dash of melancholy in her voice. "I have often wondered," she continued, after a moment's pause, "whether you others, grand signori, ever ask yourselves, when you bestow such regards as you speak of on a poor artist—I know who she is, merely an artist

like myself—what the result to the woman so loved is likely to be?"

"Signora!" cried Ludovico, provoked, exactly as Bianca had intended he should be, into saying what he would not otherwise have allowed to escape him, "permit me to assure you that, however pertinent such speculations may be in other cases, which have doubtless fallen under your observation, they are altogether the reverse of pertinent in the present instance. The lady in question is, as you say, a poor artist; not, perhaps, as you were also kind enough to say, one quite of the same kind as yourself, neither so successful nor so celebrated"—he hastened to add as he saw a sudden paleness come over the face of the singer, and an expression sudden and rapidly repressed and effaced, of such a concentration of wrath and hatred in her eyes, that momentary as it was, pulled him up short with something very much akin to a feeling resembling fear—"an artist neither so successful nor so celebrated as the Signora Lalli, but, nevertheless, a lady whom it is the dearest wish of my heart to call my wife."

"She is indeed, then, a most fortunate and happy woman," said Bianca, who had perfectly recovered herself, with grave gentleness; "and I am sure that

neither I nor any sister artist have any right to envy her her happiness. Would it seem presumption in a poor comedian to express her earnest wish that you, too, Signor Ludovico, may find your happiness in such a marriage?"

"Nay, don't speak in that tone!" said Ludovico, putting out his hand and taking hers, which she readily gave him. "I accept your good wishes, Signora, most thankfully. I do hope and think that I—that we shall find happiness in our mutual choice. But, pray observe, Signora, that our talk has led me into confiding a secret to you, that I have, as yet, told to no living soul, and that it is important to me it should be kept secret yet awhile longer. I know I may trust you; may I not?"

"Depend on it, Signor Marchese, your secret shall be quite safe with me. But are you sure it *is* a secret? And then, do you know," continued the Diva, resuming her air of pensive thought, "when I hear a man in your position speaking with such noble truthfulness, the converse of the thought that I angered you — very innocently, believe me — by expressing just now, comes into my head. And I ask myself, if women in such a position as the lady we speak of, are apt to take themselves to task with

sufficient strictness, as to what they are giving in return for all that is offered to them."

"I don't quite understand your meaning, Signora," said Ludovico, who really did not perceive the drift of his companion's words.

"I mean that a woman, so circumstanced, ought to be very sure that she is giving her heart to the *man* who asks for it, and not to his position, not to the advantages, to the wealth he offers her. She ought to feel certain that, if all this—the advantages —the wealth were to vanish and fly away, her love would remain the same. Suppose now—it is out of the question, you tell me, but the case may be imagined all the same—suppose your uncle, the Marchese, were to marry, would the Venetian lady's love suffer no tittle of falling off?"

The red blood rushed to Ludovico's cheeks and brow, and then came an angry gleam into his eyes. It was not that he resented the liberty which his companion took in thus speaking to him. It was not, either, that he felt indignant at the doubt cast, even hypothetically, on the purity of his Paolina's love. It was rather the unreasoning animal anger against the person who had given him pain. It was a stab to his heart, this germ of a doubt thus placed there for the

first time. He was conscious of the pang, and resented it. In the next minute the hot flush passed from his face, and he became very pale.

Bianca saw, and understood it all, as perfectly as if she could have seen into his heart and brain.

"The doubt, you put before me, is so horrible an one that I could almost wish it might be put to the test you speak of. But I have no such doubt. However much your questioning may be justified by other examples, it is *not* justified in the case of Paolina. I know her; I know her heart, and the perfect truthfulness that wells up from the depths of her honest eyes."

No amount of ready histrionism was sufficient to prevent a very meaning, though momentary, sneer from passing over the beautiful face of the singer as Ludovico spoke thus. But he was too much excited by his own thoughts and words to perceive it.

"I trust that you may be right, Signor Marchese. I have no doubt that you *are* right. Believe me that I have ventured to speak as I have spoken, solely from interest in the welfare of one who has been so uniformly good and kind to me as you have. Will you believe me, Signor Ludovico, that I would do a

good deal and bear a good deal to be able to conduce to your happiness in any way?"

She put out her hand to him, as she spoke the last words, with her eyes dropped to the ground, and with a feeling of genuine shyness, that was quite surprising and puzzling to herself.

"Dear Signora, I will and do believe it with all my heart; and, in truth, I am deeply grateful to you for your good will," said Ludovico, really touched by the evident and genuine sincerity of her words.

"And now, I must ask you to leave me. I must dress myself and lose no time about it. The Marchese will be here in a minute or two. And I could not, you know, venture to receive him in the unceremonious manner which you have been good enough to excuse."

She gave him a little sidelong look with half a laugh in her eyes, as she said the latter words; and Ludovico, putting the tips of her fingers to his lips before relinquishing her hand, bowed, and left her without saying anything further.

CHAPTER VI.

PAOLINA AT HOME.

Ludovico had run up in a hurry to Bianca's lodging, as has been seen, merely because it happened to be in his way, and because he had been desirous, as he told her, of paying her his compliments on the success of the preceding evening. He was hastening to pay another visit, in which his heart was far more interested, and had not intended to remain with La Lalli above five minutes. The conversation between them had extended to a greater length; and the Marchesino, eager as he was to get to the dear little room in the Via di Sta. Eufemia, would have made it still longer, had not the Diva dismissed him.

The talk between them had become far more interesting than any which he had thought likely to pass between him and the famous singer. This horrible doubt—no, not a doubt—he had not, would

not, could not doubt; but this germ of a doubt deposited in his mind by the words she had spoken? Could she have had any second motive for speaking as she had done? Surely not; surely all her manner and her words showed sufficiently clearly that she was actuated by kindly feelings towards him and by no unkindly feeling towards Paolina. Yet unquestionably Paolina's instinctive prejudice against her would not have been diminished by a knowledge of what the Diva had said. Ludovico thought of the bitter and burning indignation with which his darling would have heard the expression of the possibility of a doubt of the uncalculating purity and earnestness of her love.

Nevertheless he felt that he should have liked to talk further with Bianca on the subject; of course only to convince her of the absolute injustice of her suspicions. Still she was a woman, a fellow artist; placed in some respects in the same position in relation to the world to which he belonged, as his Paolina—in *some* respects similar; but oh, thank God, how different! Yet women understood each other in a way a man could never hope to understand them. What immediately struck Bianca, struck her naturally and instinctively in this matter of a

marriage between him and the Venetian artist, was the idea that Paolina, almost as a matter of course, was at least biassed in her acceptance of his love by a consideration of the material advantages she would gain by it. It was the natural thing then, the thing *à priori* to be expected, that a girl in Paolina's position should be so influenced. Ludovico would fain have questioned and cross-questioned La Bianca, his experienced monitress, a little more on this point.

Yes, to be expected *à priori*. But when one knew Paolina; when one knew her as he knew her, was it not impossible? Could it be that Paolina, being such as he knew her in his inmost heart to be, should even adulterate her love with interested calculations? He *knew* it was not so; and yet—and yet other men had been as certain as he, and had been deceived. In short the germ of doubt had been planted in his mind. And Bianca well knew what she had been about when she planted it there.

Why had she done so? She spoke with perfect sincerity when she had told him that she would do much and suffer much for his happiness. And yet she had knowingly placed this thorn in his heart. Why could she not let him, as Quinto Lalli had

expressed it, have his Venetian in peace? She spoke truly, moreover, when she said that, married to the Marchese Lamberto, she fully purposed to make him a good and true wife; truly, when she declared to old Lalli, and also to her own heart, that she really did like and admire him much. And yet there was something in the sight of the love of Ludovico and Paolina that was bitter, odious, intolerable to her.

Ludovico hastened to the house in the Via di Santa Eufemia on quitting that in the Via di Porta Sisi, not unhappy, not even uneasy; with no recognized doubt, but with a germ of doubt in his mind.

Signora Orsola had gone out *per fare le spese*, to make the marketings for the day; and he found Paolina alone. Such a *tête-à-tête* would have been altogether contrary to all rules in the more strictly regulated circles of Italian society. And it would have been all the more, and by no means the less contrary to rule in consequence of the position in which Ludovico and Paolina stood towards each other. But the world to which Paolina belonged lives under a different code in these matters. And ever since the day in which the memorable conversation between her and her lover, which has been

recorded in a former chapter, had taken place, Paolina had never felt the smallest embarrassment or even shyness in her intercourse with him. And she received him now with openly expressed rejoicing, that the chance of Orsola's absence gave them the opportunity of being for a little while alone together.

"I called at this early hour, *tesoro mio*," said Ludovico, "mainly to tell you that I have made all the necessary arrangements at St. Apollinare in Classe, and you can begin your work there as soon as you like. What a dreary place it is. To think of my little Paolina working, working away all by herself in that dismal old barn of a church out there amid the swamps!".

"Oh, I shan't be a bit afraid. I am so accustomed to work all by myself."

"No, there is nothing to be afraid of! Do you think I should let you go there alone, if there were? You will find the scaffolding all ready for you."

"Thanks, dearest, I am so much obliged to you; I should never have been able to get my task done without your help. Ah, how strange things are! To think, that that Englishman, in sending me here, should have been——"

"Should have been sending me my destined

wife. Who ever in the world did me so great a service as this Signor Vilobé, who never had a thought of me in his mind."

"And if I had chanced not to be in the gallery at the Belle Arti that day," rejoined Paolina, with a shudder at the thought of what the consequences of such an absence would have been.

"You will have the great church entirely to yourself, *anima mia*," said Ludovico; "there is not a soul near the place, save the old monk, who keeps the keys, and a lay brother, who was ill, the poor old *frate* said, when I was there. It is a dreary place, my Paolina, and I am afraid you will find your task a weary one. I fear it will be cold too."

"Oh, I don't mind that much! What is more important, is to get the job done before the hot weather comes on. They say it is so unhealthy out there, when the heat comes. What is the old *frate* like?

"He is a very old, old man, and he looks as if fever and ague every summer and autumn had pretty nearly made an end of him. He seemed quite inclined to be civil and obliging. If he were not, you could knock him down with a tap of your maul-stick, I should think, though it be wielded by such a

tiny, dainty little bit of a hand," said Ludovico, lifting it to his lips between both his as he spoke. "And now tell me," he continued; "what did you think of the third act last night? Did she not sing that finale superbly?"

"Superbly,—certainly the finest singing I ever heard. But——"

"What is the 'but,' *anima mia?* I confess I thought it perfect."

"So I suppose it was. But I think that perhaps I should have had more pleasure in hearing a less magnificent singer, who was more *simpatica* to me. I can't help it, but I do not like her; and I am sure I can't tell why. I have no reason; but do you know, Ludovico mio, there was one moment when, strange as it may seem, our eyes met—hers and mine—in the theatre last night. It was just as she turned away from your box, when you had put the bouquet into her hand. She looked up, and our eyes met; and I can't tell you the strange feeling and impression that her look made upon me. And I am quite sure that, for some unaccountable reason or other, she does not like me. She looked at me—it was only half a moment—with a sort of mocking triumph and hatred in her eyes, that quite made me shudder and turn cold.

"If it were not so entirely impossible, I should think you were jealous, my little Paolina. If I were to—what shall we say?—if I were to set out on a journey with *la Diva, tête-à-tête,* to travel from here to Rome, should you be jealous?"

"With La Bianca?"

"Yes! with La Bianca."

"I don't know. I don't think that I should in earnest. I know in my inmost heart, my own love, that you love me truly and entirely; I feel it, I am sure of it. But all the same, I should rather that you did not travel from here to Rome alone with La Lalli."

"That means that, to a certain degree, you *are* jealous, little one. Do you think I should be uneasy if you were called on to travel under the escort, for example, of our friend the Conte Leandro?"

"The Conte Leandro!" cried Paolina, laughing, "I am sure you ought to be uneasy at the bare thought of such a thing, for you know how terrible it would be to me. But is it quite the same thing, *amico mio?* La Lalli is indisputably a very beautiful woman; and the Conte Leandro is—the Conte Leandro. But it is not that she is beautiful. I don't know what it is. There is something about her—

ecco, I should not the least mind now your travelling to the world's end, or being occupied in any other way, with the Contessa Violante."

"She is *not* a beautiful woman, certainly."

"She is, at all events, fifty times more pleasing-looking, as well as more attractive in every way, than the Conte Leandro. But that is not what makes the difference. I take it, the difference is, that one feels that the Contessa Violante is good, and that nobody would get anything but good from her. I have got quite to love her myself."

"And yet you see, Paolina mia, somehow or other it came to pass that I could not love her, when I was bid to do so; and, in the place of doing that, I went and loved somebody else instead. How is that to be accounted for, eh?"

"I am sure that is more than I can guess, Ludovico."

"One thing is clear—and a very good thing it is—that Violante has no more desire to marry me than I have to marry her. As soon as ever Carnival is over, my own darling, I mean to speak definitively to my uncle, and tell him, in the first place, that he must give up all notion of a marriage between Violante and me."

"As soon as Carnival is over. Why, that will be the day after to-morrow," said Paolina, flushing all over.

"Exactly so; the day after to-morrow. But I mean only to tell him, in the first instance, that I cannot make the marriage he would have me. Then, when that is settled—and some little time allowed for him to get over his mortification, *il povero zio*—will come the announcement of the marriage I *can* make. I have quite fixed with myself to do it the day after to-morrow. But—I don't know what to make of my uncle. He is not in the least like himself. I am afraid he must be ill. I fully expected that I should have to fight all through Carnival against constant exhortations to pay my court to the Contessa. But he has never spoken to me a word on the subject."

"Perhaps he has discovered that the lady likes the proposal no better than you do," suggested Paolina, with a wise look of child-like gravity up at her lover's face.

"No; it's not that. He never dreams of her having any will in the matter apart from that of her family. I can't make him out. There's something wrong with him. He looks a dozen

years older than he did; and his habits are changed too."

"Do you think—that is—it has just come into my head—do you remember, Ludovico, what I said to you last night at the theatre about the way La Lalli sung her love verses at him?"

"La Lalli again. Why, she has fascinated you at all events. You can think of nothing else. La Lalli and *lo zio*. *Dio mio!* If you only knew him. All the *prime donne* in Europe might sing at him, or make eyes at him, or make love to him, in any manner they liked from morning till night without making any more impression on him than a hundred years, more or less, on the tomb of the Emperor Theodoric out there. No, *anima mia, that's* not it. No, *il povero zio*, I am more inclined to think that he is breaking up. It does happen, sometimes, that your men, who have never known a day's illness in their lives, break down all of a sudden in that way. Everybody in the city has been saying that he is changed and ill. But I must be off, my darling. I only came to tell you that all was in readiness for you at St. Apollinare. At least that was my excuse for coming. But now I must go and see about all sorts of things for the reception to-night. We shall have all the

world at the Palazzo to-night. And *lo zio* asked me to see to everything. *Addio, Paolina mia.* You know where my heart will be all the time. *Addio, anima mia.*

CHAPTER VII.

TWO INTERVIEWS.

After Ludovico had passed into the sitting-room in the Via di Porta Sisi to pay his visit to Bianca, Quinto Lalli prepared to leave the house in accordance with her suggestion that he should dispose of himself out-of-doors for the present. But before going he called Gigia the maid, and said, as he stood with the door in his hand :—

"Gigia, *cara mia*, the Marchese Lamberto is coming here presently; just make use of your sharp ears to hear what passes between him and Bianca; and take heed to it, you understand, so as to be able to give an account of it afterwards if it should be needed. You need not say anything about it to *la bambina* till afterwards; I have no secrets from her, you know, and, as soon as the Marchese is gone, you may tell her that you have heard everything, and that

I directed you to do so; but better to say nothing about it beforehand. *Inteso?*"

"*Sì, sì, Signor Quinto! Lasci fare a me!*"

And, with that, the careful old man went out for his walk, and it was not half-an-hour after Ludovico left the house before the Marchese made his appearance.

Bianca, now having completed her toilette, started from her sofa, and went forward to meet him with both hands extended, and with one of her sunniest smiles.

"This is kind of you, Signor Marchese. I hoped, ah! how I hoped, that you would come. If you had not, I don't know what would have become of me. My heart was already sinking with the dreadful fear that my little note might have displeased you. But, thank God, you are here: and that is enough."

"Of course, Bianca, I came when you begged me to do so," said the Marchese, looking at her with a sort of sad wistfulness, and retaining both her hands in his. He advanced his face to kiss her, and she stooped her head so as to permit him to press his lips to her forehead.

"Was it of course, *amore mio?*" she said, with

a gushing look of exquisite happiness, and a little movement towards clasping his hand, which still held hers, to her heart. "Was it of course that you should come to your own, own Bianca when she begged it? But you are looking fagged, harassed, troubled, *mio bene:* have you had anything to vex you? Henceforward, you know, all that is trouble to you is trouble to me. I shall insist on sharing your sorrows as well as your joys, Lamberto. What is it that has annoyed you, *amore mio?*"

"I have much on my mind—necessarily, Bianca mia; many things that are not pleasant to think of. Can you not guess as much?"

"I have had but one thought, *amico mio,* since I heard from your lips the dear words that told me that henceforward we should be but one; that our lives, our hopes, our fears, would be the same; that, in the sight of God and man, you would be my husband, and I your wife. Since then, I have had but one thought, and it is one which would avail to gild all others, let them be what they might, with its brightness. Is the same thought as sweet a source of happiness to you, my promised husband?"

"That's clear enough, I hope," thought Gigia, outside the door, to herself. "*Che!* If nothing had been

said the other day, that would be enough; and I think Quinto might trust *nostra bambina* to manage her own affairs. She knows what she is about, the dear child: not but that it is a good plan to be able to remind a gentleman in case he should forget. Gentlemen will forget such things sometimes."

"You cannot doubt my love," said the Marchese, in reply to her appeal.

Those five words may possibly, in the course of the world's history, have occurred before in the same combination. But the phrase served the occasion as well as if it had been entirely new and original.

"Indeed, I do not, Lamberto; nor will you again, I trust, ever doubt mine as you seemed to do last night. Ah, Lamberto! you do not know how bitterly I wept over the remembrance of those cruel words when I had parted from you. You will never, never, say such again. Tell me you never will."

"Doubts and fears, my Bianca, are the inevitable companions of such a love as mine," said the Marchese, with a somewhat sickly smile; "but the few words you said last night sufficed to dissipate them, as I assured you."

"But there is still something troubling your

mind, Lamberto. See, I already take the wifely privilege you have given me to wish to share all that annoys you. What is it? Come and sit by me here on the sofa, and tell me all about it."

And then the Marchese sat himself in the seat of danger that had been proposed to him, and, in a certain degree, explained to Bianca the difficulties attending a marriage with her. He tried hard to recommend to her favourable consideration the plan of a secret marriage—of a marriage to be kept secret, at all events, for awhile for the present; but such an arrangement, as may easily be understood, did not, in Bianca's view, meet the requirements of the case. That was not what she wanted. It may also be easily understood that the Marchese, occupying the position which the enemy had assigned to him, carried on the contest at an overpowering disadvantage, and was finally routed, utterly conquered, and yielded at discretion.

On her side the advantages of the situation were made the most of with the most consummate generalship. The limit between that which was permitted to him, and that which was denied to him, was drawn with a firmness and judgment admirably conducive to the attainment of the end in view. He was

permitted to encircle the slender, yielding waist with one arm as he sat by her side on the sofa, and to retain possession of her hand with the other; but any advanced movement from this base of operations was firmly and unhesitatingly repressed. At one moment, when the attacking party seemed to be on the point of pressing his advances with more vigour than before, it chanced that the Diva coughed; and it so happened that, in the next instant, Gigia entered the room, bringing wood for the fire in her arms—a diversion which, of course, involved the execution of a hurried movement of retreat on the part of the enemy.

The whole of Bianca's tactics, indeed, were admirable. And the result was, as usual, victory. Once again, as long as he was in her presence and by her side, the unfortunate Marchese felt that the spell was irresistible—absolutely irresistible by any force of volition that he was able to oppose to it. Once again it seemed to him that the only thing in the world that it was utterly impossible to him to relinquish was the possession of Bianca. The hot fit of his fever was on him in all its intensity; and there was nothing that he could do, or suffer, or undergo that he would not rather do, or suffer, or undergo than admit the

thought of giving her up. It really seemed as if there were some physical emanation from her person —some magnetic stream—some distillation from the nervous system of one organization mysteriously potent over the nervous system of another, which mounted to his brain, mastered the sources of his volition, and drew him helpless after her, as helplessly as the magnetized patient obeys the will of his magnetizer.

Suddenly both of them heard one o'clock strike from the neighbouring church. To the Marchese it was a knell which, with horrid warning-note, dragged him forcibly back from his Circean dalliance to the thoughts, the things, and the people whose incompatibility with the possibility of such dalliance was driving him mad. It was the hour at which he had promised to wait upon the Cardinal. It was absolutely necessary that he should go at once; and he tore himself away from that fatal sofa-seat with a wrench, and a reflection on the purpose of his visit to the Legate, which seemed to him really to threaten to disturb his reason.

Slinkingly he stole from the house in the Strada di Porta Sisi, and hurried to the Cardinal's palace. His mind seemed to reel, and a cold sweat broke out

all over him as he rang the bell at the top of the great stone stair of the Legate's dwelling.

This business that he was now here for—those high honours which were about to be lavished upon him—would they not all make his position so much the worse? The higher he stood, would not his fall be the more terrible? What would be said or thought of him? At Rome, immediately after the high distinction shown him, what would they not say? Here, in Ravenna, how should he look his fellow-citizens in the face? Impossible, impossible. Could he venture even to accept the high distinction offered to him? Would there not be something dishonourable—a sort of treachery in suffering this mark of the Holy Father's special favour to be bestowed upon him, while he was meditating to do that which, if his intention were known, would make it quite impossible that any such honour should be conferred on him?

And how fair was life before him, as it would be if only this fatal woman had never crossed his path? And was it not even yet in his own power to make it equally fair again? Was it not sufficient for him to *will* that it should be so?

What if he never saw Bianca again? What could

avail any nonsense she or her pretended father might talk of HIM? If they were to declare on the house-tops that he had promised marriage to La Lalli, what human being in all the city would believe them? The very notion that such a thing could be possible would be treated as the impudent invention of people who clearly had not the smallest knowledge of the man they were attempting to practise on. No, he had but to will it to be free. If only he could *will* it.

And with these thoughts passing through his mind he entered the receiving-room of the Legate.

It was impossible to be received more cordially than he was by that high dignitary. His Eminence felt sure that his old acquaintance and highly-valued good friend the Marchese was aware how great his (the Cardinal's) pleasure had been in discharging the duty that had devolved upon him. The letter he had that morning received from the Cardinal Secretary was a most flattering one. Perhaps he (the Cardinal) might take some credit to himself for having performed a friend's part, as was natural, in keeping them at Rome well acquainted with the singular merits of the Marchese. He would, indeed, have been neglecting his duty if he had done otherwise.

Then, after alluding lightly and gracefully to the special interest he could not but feel, in his private capacity, in any honour which tended yet more highly to distinguish a family with which he trusted his own might at no distant day be allied, he told the Marchese that it was probable that nothing would be done in the matter till after Easter.

It was the gracious wish of the Holy Father to enhance the honour bestowed by conferring it with his own apostolic hand; and, doubtless, as soon as Lent should be over, it would be intimated to the Marchese that the Holy Father was desirous of seeing him at Rome. When he came back thence his fellow-citizens would, in all probability, wish to mark, by some little festivity or otherwise, with which he, on the part of the government, should have great pleasure in associating himself, their sense of the honour done to their city in the person of its most distinguished citizen.

The Marchese, while the Cardinal Legate was making all these gracious communications, strove to look as "like the time" and the occasion as he could. At first it was very difficult to him to do so at all satisfactorily. The influence of that other interview, from which he had so recently come, was too strong upon him. All the images and ideas

called up by the Cardinal's words were too violently at variance, and too incompatible with those other desires and thoughts to affect him otherwise than as raising additional obstacles and piling up more and more difficulties in the path before him. But, as the interview with the courteous and dignified churchman proceeded, — as the *genius loci* of the Cardinal's library began to exert its influence—as all the hopes and ambitions and prospects which were opened before his eyes, falling into their natural and proper connection of continuity with all his former life, so linked the present moment with that past life as to make all that had filled the last few weeks seem like a fevered dream,—gradually the Marchese entered more and more into the spirit of the Cardinal's conversation. Gradually all that he had hitherto lived for came to seem to him again to be all that was worth living for. Old habitual thoughts and ideas, the growth and outcome of a whole life, once again asserted their wonted supremacy; and the Marchese Lamberto marvelled that it should be possible for that to happen to him which *had* happened to him.

Ah! if only weak men were as prone to run away from temptation as they are to run away from the difficulties that are created by yielding to it. But

they are ever as brave to run the risks of confronting the tempter, as cowardly to face the results of having done so.

The Cardinal had not failed to mark the air of constraint and dispirited lassitude which had characterized the Marchese during the commencement of their conversation. And he, as others had done, attributed it to the supposition that the Marchese was very rapidly growing old — likely enough, was breaking up. Nor did he less observe the very notable change in him as their interview proceeded— the result, as the churchman flattered himself, of the charms of his own eloquence and felicitous manner. He was himself a good twenty years older than the Marchese; but he had been put into great good humour that morning by private letters accompanying the official despatch that has been mentioned, which had hinted at favourable possibilities in the future as to certain ambitious hopes that had rarely failed to busy his brain every night as he laid it on the pillow for many a year. So he smiled inwardly a gentle moralizing smile as he thought how gratified ambition had power to stir up the flagging passions and stimulate the sinking energies even as the golden bowl is on the eve of being broken.

The Marchese, however, left the Cardinal's presence a much happier man for the nonce than he had entered it, his mental vision filled with pictures of ribbons, stars and crosses, with, perhaps, a statue—between the two ancient columns in the Piazza Maggiore would be an excellent site—in the background.

Ah! if only he could have had the courage to run away from temptation.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CARNIVAL RECEPTION.

On that Monday night all the world of Ravenna were assembled in the suite of state-rooms on the *piano nobile* of the Palazzo di Castelmare. The cards of invitation had announced that masks would be welcomed by the noble host; and a large number of the younger portion of the society accordingly presented themselves in dominoes and the silk half-masks which are usually worn in conjunction with them. But very few of either ladies or gentlemen came in character. Such costumes were mostly reserved for the ball, which was to take place at the Circolo dei Nobili on the following evening. That was of course *the* wind-up of the Carnival; and besides it was felt, that a shade or two more of licence and of the ascendancy of the Lord of Misrule might fitly be permissible at the Circolo, than was

quite *de mise* in the rooms of so grave and reverend a Signor as the Marchese Lamberto di Castelmare.

A few determined revellers would lose no opportunity of enjoying the delight of dressing themselves up in costumes, which they deemed specially adapted to show off to advantage either their physical perfections or their intellectual and social pretensions. Sometimes, as may have been observed by those who have witnessed such revelries, it unfortunately happens that both the above desirable results are not quite compatible. Our friend the Conte Leandro, for instance, having determined to appear at the Circolo ball in the character of Dante—which, for a poet at Ravenna, was a very proper and natural selection—presented himself at the Palazzo Castelmare in that of Apollo—an equally well-imagined presentation; had it not been that the happy intellectual analogy was less striking to the vulgar eye, than the remarkable exhibition of knock-knees and bow-legs resulting from the use of the "fleshings," which constituted an indispensable portion of the god's attire.

He carried in one hand what had very much the appearance of a gilt gridiron; but was intended to represent a lyre; and in the other a paper, which was soon known to contain a poem of congratulation

addressed to the host, on the announcement which, all the city well knew by this time, had been made to him that morning.

The rooms were thronged with black dominoes, and white dominoes, and pink, and scarlet, and blue, and particoloured dominoes. Violante was there in a black domino, and Bianca in a white one. There was very little dancing, but plenty of chattering and laughing. One main thing to be done by every person there was to congratulate the host on his new honours. Our Conte Apollo, among the rest, would fain have read his poem on the occasion. But as he approached the Marchese for the purpose, a white silk domino, that was standing by the Marchese's side, burst into such an uncontrollable fit of silvery and most musical, but too evidently uncomplimentary laughter, that the poor god of song was too abashed by it to make head against it.

"Surely never had Apollo such a representative before," said the Marchese to his companion, as the mortified god turned away.

"The voice, the face, the lyre, and the legs; oh, the legs!" said the silvery voice of the white domino in return.

The words of both speakers had been uttered

sotto voce; but the Conte Leandro had unfortunately sharp ears; and not only heard what was said, but was at no loss to recognize the voice of the second speaker.

The poor poet was destined not to find the evening an agreeable one. A little later he was passing by an ottoman in one of the less crowded rooms, on which the Marchese Ludovico was sitting with the Contessa Violante. She had, at an early period of the evening, abandoned all pretence of keeping up her incognito, and was dangling her black mask from her finger by its string as she sat talking to Ludovico. Leandro turned towards them to pay his compliments to the Contessa, and possibly in the hope of being allowed to read his copy of verses. But here again mortification awaited him.

"What, Æsop, Leandro! What put it into your head to choose the old story-teller for a model? You look the part to perfection, it is true; but what is that thing you have got in your hand?"

Again his lordship was fain to retreat.

"What a shame to torment the poor man so, in your own house too, Signor Ludovico," said Violante, who, nevertheless, could not help laughing.

"Not a bit, he's used to it. He is too absurd for

anything; an egregious vain ass," returned Ludovico, with very little precaution to prevent the object of his animadversions from hearing them. And again Leandro's acute ears did him the ill service of carrying every word that had been said to his understanding.

"Indeed I think her perfectly charming," said Violante, in continuation of the conversation, which had been interrupted by the bow-legged vision of Apollo; "extremely pretty of course, but a great deal more than that. She is fresh, ingenuous, modest, full of sensibility, and as honest-hearted as the day. You are a very fortunate man, Signor Ludovico, to have succeeded in winning such a heart."

"How came it about at first, that you spoke to her?" asked Ludovico.

"Oh, I went into the chapel in the morning, as I very often do, to recite the litany of the Virgin, and if she had remained on her scaffolding I should probably not have noticed her. But she ran down in the most obliging manner, fearing that she might disturb me, and offering to suspend her work, as long as I should remain at my devotions. It was so pretty of her, and so prettily said!"

"And then you answered her as prettily, I suppose, Signora?"

"Nay, it is not in my power to do that," said Violante, with a touch of bitterness; "but I told her, that she did not disturb me in the least; and I spoke to her of the work she was engaged on; and she asked me to come up and look at it; and so we talked on till we became very good friends."

"And then you were kind enough to converse with her on several subsequent occasions?"

"Oh, yes, we had several long talks; and I liked her so much. I am sure she is thoroughly good. I rejoice with all my heart that a destiny, so much more brilliant than anything that could have been expected for her, is likely to be hers."

"I wish Signora Contessa, that it was *more* than likely to be hers; I wish that our path lay clearer before us!" said Ludovico, with a sigh.

"Including me in the 'us'? I wish it were with all my heart. But remember, Signor Marchese, how much is possible to a man, and how little to a woman. All, that the strong expression of my own wishes and feelings can do, shall be done when the proper time comes for the doing of it. But you must not trust to that, or to me. You ought to save

me from being compelled to act at all in the matter. *You* are free to speak. And now that another besides me is so vitally concerned, I think you ought to do so without further delay."

"And I have fully made up my mind to do it, Signora Contessa. I have told Paolina, this very day, that I purpose speaking very seriously to my uncle on the subject on the day after to-morrow—the first day in Lent. I thought I would let this Carnival time pass by first without breaking in upon it, with business that cannot, I fear, be otherwise than painful. I have promised Paolina, and am fully determined to speak to my uncle on Wednesday."

"And what do you purpose saying to him?" asked Violante, looking into his face with quiet eyes.

"In the first instance I have no intention of speaking to him on the subject of Paolina——"

"No!" interrupted the Contessa, changing her look to one of surprise.

"Not to begin with, I think. To speak of my intention to make a marriage, which I cannot hope will meet his approbation, would only make my rejection of the alliance, which he hopes to see me form, the more difficult."

"Yes, that seems true; but I doubt whether you

are right there. You will begin, then, by telling him—— ?"

"I shall begin by saying that it seems clear to me, that I have little hope of any success in the quarter in which he has wished me to—— "

"Nay, that will not be quite fair, Signor Marchese," interrupted Violante, speaking very quietly. "Can you honestly tell your uncle that you have made any very strenuous efforts in that direction ?"

"But I thought, Signorina," said Ludovico, hastily;—"I surely had reason to suppose that I should be speaking in support of your sentiments quite as much as—— "

"Stay, Signor Marchese; excuse my interrupting you, but it is exactly on this point that I wished to talk with you. Let us clearly understand each other. It is, no doubt, quite true that if you and I had been left to ourselves, if no family considerations had intervened to suggest other views, neither of us would have been led by our own inclinations,—it is best to speak openly and frankly,—neither of us, I say, would have been led by our own inclinations to think more of the other than as an old and valued acquaintance. This is the truth, is it not ?"

"Nay, Signorina, you are now hardly fair; how can I say——"

"It is not fair, you would say," interrupted Violante again, "that I should force your gallantry to make so painful an avowal. Nonsense! Let us put aside all such trash: the question is, not how we shall mutually make what the circumstances require us to say to each other agreeable to the self-love of either of us, and to silly rules of conventional gallantry, but there is a real question of fairness between us; and it is this: how much should each of us expect that the other will contribute towards the difficult task of liberating both of us from engagements we neither of us wish to undertake. You see, Signor Marchese, I have made up my mind to speak clearly; more clearly than I could, I think, have ventured to do, had I not the advantage of having had those conversations with my friend Paolina in the Cardinal's chapel."

"In what respect did it seem to you, that what I proposed saying to my uncle in the first instance, was unfair, Signorina?"

"In this it would be unfair. To talk of your want of success in obtaining what you never sought to obtain, is simply to throw on me the burden and

the blame of disappointing the wishes and plans of both our families. I am ready to do my part; but it would be unreasonable to expect that it can be so active or so large a part as your own. It will *not* be for you to let it be supposed that you are ready and willing to offer your hand to the Contessa Violante Marliani, trusting to my refusal to accept it in the teeth of the wishes of my family. It is your duty to say openly and plainly that *you* cannot make the marriage proposed to you. If I were in your place—if I might venture to suggest, what I would myself counsel—I should add, as a reason—an additional reason—that I had given my heart elsewhere."

"But, Signora, you forget that the marriage between us was proposed before I ever saw or heard of Paolina," said Ludovico, with a *naïveté* that should certainly have satisfied his companion that he was no longer attempting to shape his discourse according to the rules of conventional gallantry.

Violante, despite her gravity, could not forbear smiling, as she said in reply:

"Not at all, Signor. I do not in the least forget that before Paolina ever came to Ravenna, you were no whit better disposed to second the wishes of our families."

"Nay, Signorina. I declare——"

"What, again! Do let us leave all such talk. Don't you see that we may frankly shake hands on it. Don't you see that any pain that your indifference might have occasioned is entirely salved by the consciousness that I have been as bad as you. We are equally rebels against the destiny arranged for us. Let us fight the battle together then. I think that you would act wisely in telling your uncle at once that it is impossible you should make any other woman your wife than her who has your entire heart and affection. I think that this course is due to Paolina also."

"I only wished to spare my uncle, as much as possible, in breaking to him what I know will give him pain."

"People, who will wish what they ought not to wish, must endure the pain that the frustration of such wishes entails. It is certainly your right to marry according to your own inclinations."

"Yes; and in truth, as far as real power goes, there is nothing to prevent my doing so. It is truly a desire to break to my uncle, as gently as I can, that which will certainly be a blow to him. He is not well, my uncle. He is deplorably changed since the

beginning of this year. Look at him, as he passes us," he added, as he observed the Marchese Lamberto approaching the place where they were sitting, with the white satin domino on his arm.

"He is looking changed and ill, certainly," said Violante, when the Marchese had passed, apparently without noticing them; "he looks thin and worn, and yet feverish and excited. Who is the lady on his arm? She must be very tall."

Many of the assembled company had by this time, like the Contessa Violante, discarded their masks, finding the heat, which always results from the use of them, oppressive, and not perceiving that any further amusement was to be got by retaining them. But the white domino, leaning on the Marchese's arm, still retained hers. It is not likely that Bianca herself could have had any objection to its being seen by all Ravenna that she monopolized the attention of the Marchese during the entire evening. And it is therefore probable that she had retained her disguise in compliance with some hint given to that effect by the Marchese Lamberto.

"I take it it must be La Lalli, the *prima donna*. I know she is here to-night and in a white domino, though I have not yet spoken to her. I am afraid

my uncle must be tired and bored with her. He always makes a point of showing those people attention; and besides he had so much to do with bringing her here. I dare say we shall hear her once or twice again in this house before she leaves Ravenna. My uncle is fond of getting up some good music in Lent, when he can."

"The Marchese Lamberto did not look to me as if he was tired or bored," said Violante, thoughtfully.

"I hope he is not. Here comes that absurd animal Leandro again. Did you ever see anything so outrageously ridiculous?"

Ludovico and the Contessa then rose from their seats, and Violante taking his arm drew him in the direction in which the Marchese Lamberto had led the white satin domino.

CHAPTER IX.

PAOLINA'S RETURN TO THE CITY.

THERE remained now but one day more of that Carnival, which remained memorable for many years afterwards in Ravenna, for the terrible catastrophe that marked its conclusion.

All that these people, whose passions, and hopes, and fears have been laid open to the reader, were doing during those Carnival weeks was gradually leading up, after the manner of human acts, to the terrible event which rounded off the action with such fatal completeness. And the catastrophe was now at hand.

During the reception at the Castelmare palace on that night of the last day of Carnival but one, the white domino, whom Ludovico had rightly supposed to be Bianca—a guess which had been shared by many other persons in the room—had pretty exclu-

sively occupied the attention of the Marchese Lamberto. And it must be supposed that the resolution was then taken between them which led to the summons of Signor Fortini, the family lawyer, to the palazzo on the first day of Lent, as was related in the first book of this narrative. It was on the morning of Ash Wednesday, it will be remembered, that the lawyer had received from the Marchese the formal communication of his intention to marry the Signorina Bianca Lalli.

The reader knows, also, that what took place in the interval between the night of the reception at the Palazzo Castelmare and the morning of the first day in Lent was not calculated, as might have been supposed, to assist in bringing the mind of the Marchese to a final determination to that effect. The terrible degree to which his jealousy and anger had been excited on the night of the ball at the Circolo by Ludovico and Bianca will also not have been forgotten. The conduct which had awakened that jealousy was, in a great measure, if not entirely, innocent on the part of both the offenders, as the reader will also, no doubt, remember. The similarity of the costume adopted by the Marchesino and Bianca was entirely accidental. And this, trifling

as the circumstance may seem, had contributed very materially to arouse the Marchese's wrath and jealous agony. Bianca, perhaps, under the circumstances, ought not to have danced as frequently as she did with the Marchesino. She at least knew that the Marchese Lamberto had already conceived the most torturing jealousy of his nephew. Ludovico, on his part, was of course utterly unconscious that he was giving his uncle the remotest cause for umbrage by his attentions to the successful Diva.

Then came the little *téte-à-tête* supper—*tête-à-tête* by accident rather than by design, as the reader may remember; and the officious and spiteful eavesdropping and tell-tale denunciation by the angry poet.

Nevertheless, and despite of all these circumstances and of the temper of mind in which he quitted the ball-room that night, it is certain that the Marchese did, on the morning of the following Ash Wednesday, send for his lawyer and announce to him formally his intention to make the Signorina Bianca Lalli his wife. We have seen all the agonies of irresolution and indecision — all the alternating swayings of his mind, as passion or prudence predominated at the moment. He seemed utterly

unable to bring himself, save fitfully, to the final adoption of either line of conduct. And yet, at the moment when his jealousy most furiously boiled over, he decided on taking the first overt step towards the accomplishment of the deed.

Was it possibly that he was urged irresistibly forwards by the fear that if he did not at once make the prize he so eagerly coveted irrevocably his own, the power to make it so might pass away from him? that, after all, his nephew might have found the goddess as irresistible as he had found her himself; and that she might prefer the younger to the older Marchese di Castelmare?

Whatever the reflections might have been that at last drove him to take the definitive step of applying to his lawyer, we know that they were not of a pleasant kind—that the state of the Marchese's mind was anything but a happy or peaceful one during the hours that preceded his sending the message to Signor Fortini.

The manner in which the lawyer received the communication made to him, and his determination, on further consideration, to make the Marchese Ludovico at once aware of the step contemplated by his uncle, will not have been forgotten. The reader

will, it is hoped, remember also how, sallying forth after his early dinner for this purpose, Signor Fortini encountered the Marchese Ludovico in the street; how the latter communicated to the old lawyer the state of anxiety he was in about the Signorina Bianca Lalli, whom he had lost in the Pineta; and finally how the lawyer and the Marchese together had gone to the Porta Nuova, by which the road leading to St. Apollinare and to the Pineta quits the city, in order there to make inquiries,—and the terrible reply to their inquiries that there met him.

What that reply was had not been immediately clear to the lawyer. For, as far as the circumstances of the previous events were then known to him, there were two persons, Bianca Lalli, the singer, and Paolina Foscarelli, the Venetian artist—two young girls missing, who were both known to have been out of the city in that direction that morning; two young girls of whom he knew little more than this, that they had apparently reason to feel a deadly jealousy of each other. Which of these two was the one whose dead body lay there under the city gateway before him, he had no immediate means of knowing. For Ludovico, who had raised the sheet that

covered the features of the dead, and had, of course, become on the instant aware of the truth, had fallen into unconsciousness, without uttering a word beyond the one agonized outcry that, for the moment, had left little doubt on the mind of the lawyer that the victim at their feet was the girl Paolina.

But, of course, the means of setting at rest the doubt on the lawyer's mind were very soon at hand; at hand even before Ludovico recovered from his short fainting fit. For the same man among the Octroi officers, who had recognized La Lalli when she had passed with Ludovico in the morning, was now able to say that the woman who now lay dead in the gateway was in truth no other than the poor Diva.

Paolina, in fact, was by that time safe at home, and had been well scolded by Signora Orsola for having given her such a fright by playing the truant for so long.

Of course her old friend called upon her for an account of the hours which had elapsed during her prolonged absence. And Paolina, in reply to this demand, gave a very intelligible account of the time. But unfortunately, most unfortunately, as the sequel showed it to be, this account rested solely on her own statement. Of course old Orsola saw not the

smallest reason for doubting any part of it. And the explanations which she gave of her movements, and of the motives which led to them, embodied in the following statement of what happened from the time when she left the church to the time when she re-entered the city, are the result of her subsequent declarations, when called upon to account for her occupation of those hours.

The aged Capucine friar had, as we know, watched her take the path that led to the farmhouse on the border of the wood. And having looked after her as long as she was in his sight, he sighed heavily, and, turning away, went back to his prayers in the church.

But had he been able to watch her on her way a few minutes longer, he would, if the girl's own account of her movements were correct, have seen her change the direction of her walk.

About half-way between the eastern end of the church, by which the path the friar had indicated to Paolina passed, and the farmhouse on the border of the forest, another path, skirting what had once apparently been the cemetery attached to the church, turned off at right angles to the left, so as, after some distance, to rejoin the road on its way towards the city. And this path, according to her own account,

Paolina took; thus abandoning her intention of reaching the forest at the spot where the farmhouse stood. Why had she thus changed her purpose?

Various thoughts and feelings, which had presented themselves to her in the space of the minute or two she had occupied in walking round to the eastern end of the church, had contributed to produce this change in her purpose.

Unquestionably the first feeling which arose in her mind, on seeing what she had seen from the window of the church, was one of jealousy. But she combated it vigorously; and if she did not succeed in altogether conquering it,—that fiend being, by the nature of it, not to be vanquished so by one single effort, however valorous—at least put it to the rout for the present. She had known all along that Ludovico frequently saw La Bianca. She knew that he would meet her at the ball; and, doubtless, the object of their expedition this morning was, as the friar had suggested, to show the stranger the celebrated Pineta. Having thus, in some measure, tranquillized her heart, she began to think how lovely the forest must be on that fine spring morning; how much she, too, should like to see it; how good an opportunity the present was of doing so. Perhaps, too, there was some little anticipation

of the slight punishment to be inflicted on her lover, when he should be told that she had visited the Pineta alone at the very time when he had been in her immediate vicinity engaged in showing it to another.

And with these thoughts in her head, she made her inquiries, and started on her way. But before she had walked many steps, other thoughts began to present themselves to her mind. How did she know how far they had gone from the farmhouse? Might they not still be in the immediate neighbourhood of it? Might she not, very probably, fall in with them? And would not that be exceedingly disagreeable? Would she not have all the appearance of having followed them purposely from motives of jealousy? Would not her presence be unwelcome? Would there not be something of indelicacy even in thus following one who evidently preferred being with another?

These considerations sufficed to produce the change in her purpose, and in the direction towards which she turned her steps, that has been mentioned. So she returned by the path, which has been described, into the road, and proceeded along it on her return to the city. She did not trip along as briskly and alertly as she had done in coming thither; but walked

slowly and pensively with her eyes on the ground. She was thus a good deal longer in returning than in going. And when she had reached the immediate neighbourhood of the city, she turned aside before entering the gate, into a sort of promenade under some trees near the city wall, and sat down on one of the stone benches there to think a little.

And presently, as she was busy thinking, she was startled into much displeasure against herself by discovering that two large utterly unauthorised tears were running down her cheeks.

What was the meaning of that? Surely she was not jealous still, after all the good reasons for not being so, that she had so conclusively pointed out to herself?

No, she was not jealous. She *would* not be jealous. But it would have been so nice in the Pineta. The sun was now high in the heavens. The birds were singing on every tree; and Ludovico was enjoying it with that woman, whom, when she had seen her at the theatre, she had found it so impossible to like or to tolerate. Yet she would not, could not, doubt that Ludovico loved herself, and her only.

She dried her tears, and determined that she would not let doubts of what she really did not doubt

torment her. But still she sat on and on upon the bench in the shade musing on many things—on the Contessa Violante, on the steps Ludovico had said that he would take this very first day of Lent towards the open breaking off of all engagement with that lady, and on the amount of scandal and difficulty that would thence arise.

Then her fancy, despite all her endeavours and determinations to the contrary, would go back to paint pictures of the beauty of La Bianca, as she sat by the side of Ludovico in the little carriage. How lovely she had looked, and how happy,—so evidently pleased with herself, with her companion, and with all about her. And Ludovico had seemed in such good spirits—so happy, so thoroughly contented. He did not want any one else to be with him. He was far enough from thinking of the fond and faithful heart that would have been made so happy—oh, so happy—if it had been given to *her* to sit there by his side.

She sat thinking of all these things till she was roused from her reverie by the city clocks striking noon. It was three good hours later than she had supposed it to be; and she jumped up from her seat, intending to hasten home to Signora Orsola Steno.

All this Paolina stated partly to Signora Orsola on her return home, and partly in reply to inquiries subsequently made of her by inquirers far less easily satisfied.

But chance—or, what for want of a better designation, we are in the habit of so calling—had decreed that Signora Orsola should not be delivered from her suspense so quickly.

On turning into the shady promenade under the city walls, a little before reaching the Porta Nuova, Paolina had strolled onwards, before sitting down on one of the benches that tempted her after her walk, till she fancied that it would be shorter for her to reach the Via di Santa Eufemia by another gate, which gave admission to the city at the other end of the promenade, instead of by turning back to the Porta Nuova. And thus, though she had in truth returned to the city, the men at that gate were quite right in their statement that she had not returned by the way they guarded.

The road, however, by which Paolina proposed to return to her home led her past the residence of the Cardinal, and, as she passed, it occurred to her that it would be well, and save another walk, to look in at the chapel and put together the things she had left

in it on finishing her task there, so that they might be ready for a porter to bring away when she should send for them.

For this purpose she ascended the great staircase of the Cardinal's palace, and was at once admitted to pass on into the chapel, as a matter of course, by the servants, who had become quite used to her visits there; and, from this point forwards, the accuracy of her statements was easily proved by other testimony besides her own.

It would not have taken her long, as she had said to herself, to get her things together and make them ready for being fetched away. But in the chapel she found the Lady Violante on her knees on the fald-stool before the altar. It was the first day in Lent, and, accordingly, a period of extra devotion. The sins, the excesses, the frivolities, of the Carnival had to be atoned for by extra prayers and religious exercises; and if Violante had herself been guilty of no sins, excesses, or frivolities, during the festive season, yet there was abundant need of her prayers for those who had.

On hearing a light footfall behind her she looked round; and, on seeing Paolina, rose from her knees, and advanced a step to meet her.

"You are come to take away your things, *cara mia*. The scaffolding has already been removed. I suppose you are very glad that your task here is done; and it would be selfish, therefore, to say that I am sorry. How often it happens, Paolina, that we are tempted to wish what we ought not to wish."

"I don't think, Signorina, that I often wish what my conscience tells me I ought not to desire; and I should have thought that such a thing had never occurred to you. I wished very much to do something this morning, and I began to do it; but then I thought that I ought not to do it, and I did not."

"Then, my child, you are all the happier. It is a happy day for you."

Paolina sighed a great sigh, and dropped her eyes to the ground.

"Then I suppose the evil wish was not wholly conquered," said Violante, looking into her companion's eyes with a grave smile.

"It was this, Signora: I walked out very early this morning to St. Apollinare in Classe, where I am to make some copies of the Mosaics, which I hope to begin to-morrow. A scaffolding has been prepared for me; and I went to see that all was ready."

And then poor little Paolina was tempted to pour out all her heart and its troubles to her gravely kind and gentle friend. And Violante spoke such words of comfort as her conscience would allow her to speak in the matter. And the talk between the two girls ran on; and the minutes ran on, too. And poor old Orsola Steno, at the end of her stock of patience at last, had taken the step that has been narrated.

And thus it had come to pass that Paolina had played the truant, and that her protracted absence had led to Signor Fortini's momentary doubt as to the identity of the corpse he had seen brought into the city.

BOOK V.

WHO DID THE DEED?

CHAPTER I.

AT THE CITY GATE.

Bianca Lalli lay dead at the city gate. Fresh from her triumphs, her successes, her schemes, her hopes, her frolic, at the full tide of her fame, and her matchless beauty, the poor Diva was—dead!

How she came by such sudden death there was nothing whatever in her appearance to tell—scarcely anything to tell that she *was* dead. In a quiet composed attitude stretched on her back, she lay in the light white dress she had put on for her excursion with Ludovico. With the exception of a broad blue ribbon round the waist, and another which bound her wealth of auburn hair, her entire dress was white. It was now scarcely whiter than her face. But there was on the features neither disorder nor sign of pain.

From a feeling of natural respect for death, and perhaps, also, for the extreme beauty of the young

face in death, the bearers of the body had covered it with a coarse linen sheet, such as they had chanced to find to hand. But the duty of the officers of the gate would have required them to uncover the face, even if Ludovico in the first agony of his doubt had not already done so. There, amid the pitying throng of rough men, she lay beneath the sombre old gateway vault. The extraordinary abundance of her hair fell in great loose tresses, some making rich contrast with the white dress that covered her shoulders, and some of it thrown back behind over the door on which the body lay.

A terrible and deadly sickness came over Ludovico, and his face became almost as white as that of the corpse. His head swam round; and, reeling back from the sight that met his eyes, he swooned, and would have fallen to the ground had the lawyer not caught him.

"I suppose," said Fortini, to the men who crowded round the body, while he paid attention to the Marchesino,—"I suppose that there can be no doubt that she is dead?"

"She's as dead as the door she lies on," said one of the men who had helped to carry the body, shaking his head gravely, as he looked pitifully down on her;

"as dead as the door she lies on,—more's the pity, for she looks like one of them that find it good to live,—more's the pity,—more's the pity."

"*Che bella donna! È proprio un viso d'angiolo,*" said another; "and so young too. There's some heart somewhere that'll be sore for this."

"Pretty creature; it is enough to break one's own heart to look at her as she lies there," said a third.

While a fourth of the rough fellows stood and sobbed aloud, and let the tears run down his furrowed cheeks, without the smallest effort to control or hide his emotion. For an Italian, especially an Italian man of the people, unlike the men of the Teuton races, is never ashamed of emotion. He very often manifests a great deal which he does not genuinely feel; but he never seeks to hide any that he does feel.

All this while the officials at the gate, some six or eight of them, standing thus round the extemporized bier, were closely questioning the men, who had been the bearers; Ludovico and the old lawyer were thus shut out from the circle which had formed itself around the body, and were on the outside of it. A boy, belonging to one of the gate officials, brought, at the lawyer's bidding, a glass of cold water, by the

help of which the young Marchese was quickly restored to consciousness. He was able to rise to his feet again before the officers had concluded their official questioning of those who had brought in the body. And the lawyer looked anxiously into his face to ascertain that he was capable of understanding what was said to him, as he stood, still apparently half-stunned by the shock of the event, against the doorway of the little dwelling of the gatekeepers.

"Stand where you are and say nothing; we will go away together presently," whispered the lawyer in his ear, griping him hard at the same time by the arm, and giving him a little shake, as if to rouse him to comprehension; a mode of speaking and acting on the part of Signor Fortini, which would have seemed very extraordinary to the young Marchese at any other time, but which he was now too much overpowered by what had happened to notice.

Signor Fortini had no official character or function, which in any way gave him the right, or made it his duty to meddle with the circumstances, that had occurred by chance in his presence. But he was so well known to all the city, was mixed in one way or another with so many matters of business, and was so much and so generally looked up to, that the

people at the gate, hardly knowing what their own duty required of them under circumstances so unusual, turned to him for directions as to what they ought to do.

"What you have to do, my good friend, is simple enough," said the lawyer, addressing the superior official at the gate; "you must, in the first place, receive and take charge of the body. You must inquire of these good folks all they have to tell you, together with their names and addresses. You must draw up a *processo verbale*, embodying all such information; and then you must have the body conveyed to the mortuary at the hospital, at the same time making your report to the police, and delivering up the body into their custody. In such a case as this, it will be well, too, that these worthy men, who have brought the body here, should go with you to the police, the more so," he added, as his quick eye marked a certain blank look in the faces of the men,—"the more so, as they must be recompensed for their trouble and labour, and it is by the police that the payment for it must be made."

"*Un processo verbale!* Yes, one knows that; but under circumstances so strange—*grazie a Dio* so unheard of—if your worship would have the kindness

to put one in the way of it. Your worship is familiar with affairs of all sorts. Just an instant."

"We must hear first what these men have to say. First take down their names and addresses."

The men gave them, as the lawyer remarked to himself, with perfect willingness and alacrity.

They then related that having been at work in the forest, cutting up the branches and trunk of a tree, which had fallen from old age and natural decay, they were going to another part of the Pineta, a short distance off, where another fallen tree awaited their axes and saws, when they saw a lady asleep as they thought on a bank. They were about to pass on without interfering with her in any way, when one of their party remarked that it was odd that all the noise they had made had not wakened her, for they had come along laughing, singing, and talking loudly. This had led them to approach closely to her; and then, as they looked at her, a suspicion of the truth began to come to their minds. They touched her, and found that she was dead. She was not quite cold, they said, and were quite sure of that fact. They looked at her, and looked all around to see if they could perceive any sign of the cause of her death. But they could see nothing. There was, as far as

they could see, no trace of blood, either on her dress or anywhere around the spot where she lay. And then they had borrowed a door from the farm near St. Apollinare, and had brought the body here, and that was all they knew about it.

"Had they seen any other person in the forest that morning?"

"Not a soul; and they had been in that part of the Pineta, or at least at no great distance, all the morning from sunrise."

"Would they be able to find again and to know the spot on which they had found the body?" the lawyer asked.

"Oh, yes," they said, "easily. It was not by the side of any of the ordinary tracks through the forest—but not very far from one of them; as if the lady had turned aside from the path, and sought out a quiet spot to enjoy a *siesta* without being disturbed."

"It is pretty clear," said the lawyer, "that it has been a case of sudden death during sleep—probably from disease of the heart. Now, my friend," he said, turning to the senior of the officials, "you have only simply to state what we have heard in writing and carry it to the police. Meantime, it will be as

well to remove the body at once. Let a couple of your people accompany the men who brought it here—they may as well carry it to the mortuary.

So a sheet was obtained from a neighbouring house, the more perfectly and decently to cover the body, preparatory to its being carried through the streets. Ludovico stepped hurriedly forward from the door-post, against which he had been leaning, and looked eagerly once again at the calmly-tranquil and still beautiful face before they covered it with the sheet. And then the six men took up their burden, and, with two of the gate-officers marching at their head, moved off towards the hospital.

Then the lawyer put his hand on Ludovico's shoulder in a manner that was strange, and that would at once have seemed so to the Marchese had he at the time had any attention to give to such a circumstance, and said in a peremptory and authoritative sort of voice, very unlike his usual manner when speaking to a person in the social position of the Marchese,—

"Now, come with me, Signor Marchese. Let us go. We can do no more good here." And he put his arm within that of Ludovico, as if to lead him away, as he spoke.

The Marchese suffered the old man thus to lead him from the gate without speaking a word.

"*Now*, Signor Marchese," said the lawyer, as soon as they had turned the corner of a street, which took them out of sight of the city gate, "now, lose no time. Make for the Porta Adriana, and quit the city by that. There is an *osteria* in the *borgo* outside the gate, where you can get a *bagarino* with a quick horse for Faenza; thence cross the mountains into Tuscany. You may easily be over the frontier this night; you have plenty of time, only none to lose. It will be at least two hours before any steps can be taken; you may be beyond Faenza by that time. Have you money about you? If not I can supply you. I have a considerable sum about me—— One word more: Do not venture to remain in Florence. The Grand Ducal Government would not refuse the demand of the Nuncio in such a case; and the demand would surely be made. Better get on to Leghorn; and make for Marseilles."

"Good God, Signor Fortini! What are you talking of; and what are you dreaming of? What is it that you have got into your head?" said Ludovico, rousing himself, and stopping short in his walk to turn round and face the lawyer.

"Look here, Signor Marchese, your father was my friend and patron; your grandfather was my father's friend and patron; and, therefore, bad as this business is, I think, and will think, more of old times and old kindnesses than of what I suppose is my duty now. But don't lose time by trying to throw dust in *my* eyes. What is the use of it? What I have got in my head is what every man, woman and child in Ravenna will have in their head before this day is over. Have you sufficient money about you?"

"Signor Fortini, once again I don't know what you are driving at. I insist upon your speaking out your entire meaning. What is it you imagine?" said Ludovico, speaking angrily, but now very pale.

"Imagine! What can I imagine? The matter is, unhappily, but too clear. Why of course I imagine that you have by some means,—which the medical people will find out fast enough, doubt it not,—killed that unfortunate woman in the Pineta."

"Signor Fortini!" exclaimed Ludovico, in a voice in which horror, indignation and dismay had equal shares.

"Marchese, how can anybody have any doubt on

the matter. Alas, that I should have to say so, it is too self-evident. You persuade this poor creature to go out alone with you into the Pineta at an extraordinary hour of the morning, knowing then,—or according to your own showing, becoming aware soon after you started—that it was your uncle's intention by a marriage with this woman to destroy utterly every prospect you have in the world. What other human being can have had any ill-will against this woman, or any interest in destroying her? Your interest in doing so is of the very strongest possible kind. It was no case of robbery. The girl was put to death by some one, who had an interest in doing so. She is last seen alive with you; I find you with a singularly scared and troubled manner pretending to make inquiry respecting her, your real object evidently being to ascertain whether the fact of the murder were yet known, and to give rise to the impression that you knew nothing of the poor woman's fate. Then, when confronted with the corpse you are seen to be absolutely overcome by your emotion. Now, as I have simply stated the facts, do you imagine that a moment's doubt will be felt as to who has done this deed?"

Ludovico felt the cold sweat break out on his

forehead, as he listened to the lawyer's words. The logic of the facts did most unquestionably seem to make out a fatally strong case against him. And it was difficult to judge—very difficult even for the shrewd and practised lawyer to judge—whether the consciousness of crime, or the horror of seeing by how terribly strong evidence the suspicion of crime was brought home to him, were the cause of the emotion he manifested.

Signor Fortini, again, with rapid and practised acuteness, ran over all the circumstances in his mind; and his conclusion, unavoidable, as he felt it, was that the Marchese must have done the deed. That the criminal authorities would come to the same conclusion he could not feel the smallest doubt.

"Good God! Signor Fortini, this is very dreadful! It is as new to my mind—it comes upon me now for the first time, as much as if I had not known the fact of her death. But I see it—I see it all; as you put the matter now before me. What am I to do?—gracious heaven, what am I to do?"

"I have already told you, what you have to do; the only thing that you *can* do. You have time enough to make it quite safe, that you may be across the frontier before any pursuit can overtake you. As

for pursuing you across the frontier, that can only be done diplomatically, and of course by means which would leave you ample time to quit Tuscany."

"Signor Fortini, I am innocent of this crime. It is a crime which sickens me with horror to think of. What passed in the Pineta passed exactly as I told you. I left that unhappy girl sleeping, intending to be absent from her but a few minutes. And as there is a God in heaven I never again saw her till I saw her dead at the gate," said Ludovico, speaking with intense earnestness.

"But even if you should convince me, Signor Marchese, that such were in truth the case, whom else do you think you would be able to convince? Not one, not a single soul; above all, certainly not one of those who are used to the investigation of crime, or of those who would have to pronounce judgment on it. If I were perfectly and entirely persuaded of your innocence I should still urge you to fly. The facts of the case are too strong against you."

"But *is* that the advice you would give to an innocent man, Signor Fortini? Is that the course which an innocent man would take? Should I not by flying add such an additional damning circum-

stance to the other grounds of suspicion, as to render all possible hope of clearing myself vain?" remonstrated Ludovico.

"It is true, it would do so; and the argument is, I am bound to say, the argument of an innocent man. In any other case, in *any* other case, I should say face inquiry and prove your innocence. But, Signor Marchese, I dare not recommend you to do so. The facts, as I said, are too strong for you. Remember, too, that you do not throw away any chance by flight. For the only possible circumstance that could exonerate you would be the discovery that the deed was done by some other; and should that ever be proved or provable, you would at once return, plainly stating that you fled, not from guilt, but from a due appreciation of the fatal weight of suspicion that the circumstances and the facts cast on you. In such a case, in such a very improbable case, I should not hesitate to testify that, being by accident made aware of the circumstances, I had recommended and urged you to fly. No innocent man is bound to suffer for the misfortune of lying under a false suspicion if he can help it. You cannot face the suspicion that will rest upon you; instant flight is the only course open to you."

"Did you not say yourself at the gate just now, Signor Fortini," said Ludovico, making a strong effort to recover the use of his almost stunned faculties—"did you not yourself say that it was evidently a case of sudden death, probably from heart disease?"

"Pshaw! to the people there; to those block-heads at the gate, I said so, of course I did; but the medical folks will soon find out all about that."

"But again, as you remarked very truly, the only possible motive that I could be suspected of having for wishing the death of this unfortunate woman must be supposed to arise from my knowledge of the fact that my uncle had proposed marriage to her."

"And is not that motive enough, *per Dio?*" interrupted the lawyer.

"Doubtless it might, at all events, seem so to some people. But you spoke of my persuading her to go on this unhappy excursion with a view, as your words imply, of committing the crime you suspect me of. Now I knew nothing of any such intention on the part of my uncle till she communi cated it to me when we were in the forest."

"That is your statement——"

"And you must remember, Signor Fortini, that

I made that statement to you before I knew anything of her death."

"Before you knew anything of her death. Pshaw! You are assuming your innocence of the deed. Yes, I remember what you said. I remember only too well. Had you not spoken to me, there might have been no proof that you knew anything at all of your uncle's purpose. I wish to heaven you had not said a word to me on the subject. I shall have to testify that you declared to me, that your uncle's offer to her had been communicated to you by her. It will be impossible to avoid that. And it will be impossible to persuade the magistrate that you had not previous knowledge of such a purpose from other sources."

"But why should any such intended offer on the part of my uncle be ever heard of at all?" urged Ludovico. "He will most assuredly never be willing to speak of it, and——"

"*Che!* As if that old man, her so-called father, will not be open-mouthed as to that—as if he would not proclaim it to the whole city. Ah—h—h! it is a bad business, Signor Marchese, a bad business.

"And is it possible, Signor Fortini, that you do really in your own heart believe me to be guilty of

this deed?" said Ludovico, with a sigh that was almost a groan, and looking steadily and wistfully into the eyes of his companion.

"What is more to the purpose, unfortunately, is that it does not signify a straw whether I believe it or not. You will not be judged, Signor Marchese, by my belief; and I am very sure what those who have to judge you will believe. I have some experience of these matters. I know the courts. I see the exceeding difficulty of believing anything else as to this death than that it was done by your hands; by you, who had the opportunity and the motive, whereas, it is impossible to suggest any semblance of such motive on the part of any other human being; by you, in whose company she was last seen alive. She had valuable ornaments about her person. If you had removed them it would, at least, have left it open to the magistrates to attribute the deed to another motive, and to other hands. I see all this. I see the whole case before me; and, I tell you, that your only chance is to escape while it is yet time."

"My solemn assertion, then, produces no effect on your mind, Signor Fortini?" said Ludovico, looking at him steadily.

"Signor Marchese," said the lawyer, with an

impatient shake of the head, "let us look at the matter from the opposite point of view. If you had killed this woman, let us say, what would your conduct be? Would you not, in that case, make exactly the assertions that you now make? That is the terrible consideration that makes all assertion valueless in the case of such suspicion. But, once again, why dwell on my belief in the matter, which is nothing to the purpose? I have put your position, whether you are guilty or not guilty, clearly before your eyes. I counsel you, and strongly urge you, while yet unaccused, to escape from the accusation, which will be made against you within an hour. I am ready to assist you with the means of escaping——"

"Signor Fortini, I cannot avail myself of them. I have made up my mind I will not add another such damning ground of suspicion against me. Here I will remain to answer, as best I can, all the accusations that may be brought against me. I will not fly."

The old lawyer shook his head and sighed deeply.

"A bad business," he said, "a very bad business. It will kill the Marchese Lamberto; and I won't say what I would not have given to have escaped seeing your father's son, Signor Marchese, in the position in which you stand."

"Will you carry your kindness yet one step further, Signor Fortini, and, despite my rejection of your first advice, tell me what you think I had better first do—now immediately, I mean—on the supposition that I am determined to remain in the city?"

"I think," said the lawyer, after a pause for consideration, "that the best course for you to take in that case would be to go at once to the magistrates and make your statement to them of the circumstances according to your own version of the story,—stating that you hastened to do so on seeing the dead body at the city gate; I think that is the best thing you can do. Observe, I cannot say that I think it likely that, if you do so, you will pass this night under the roof of the Palazzo Castelmare; but, if you are determined to remain in the city, I think that is the best thing you can do."

"That, then, I will do," returned the Marchese. "I thank you, Signor Fortini, for the advice which I can follow, and not less for that which I cannot follow. Good-evening."

"Good-evening, Signor Marchese. I hope it may be better with you than I fear. And, of course, if you need me, as you will, you will summon me, and

I will not fail to be with you within a few minutes of your call."

"Thanks, Signor Fortini. *Addio.*"

"One word more, Signor Marchese, before you go. When you uncovered the face of the woman lying dead yonder you exclaimed, 'Paolina!' What was the thought that led you to do so? You could not have mistaken the identity? Of course, you know that I question you only in your own interest?"

"Did I say 'Paolina?' replied the Marchese, with an apparent effort at recollecting himself.

"You did. On seeing the face you exclaimed, 'Paolina mia!'—so much so, that I felt no doubt that it was this Paolina who lay dead there. What was it moved you to that exclamation?"

"I don't know. I can't tell. I was very anxious about Paolina. The thought of her was uppermost in my mind, I suppose."

"Humph!" said the lawyer, thoughtfully and doubtingly.

All this conversation had passed hurriedly in the small deserted street into which Ludovico and the lawyer had turned on leaving the city gate; and, when they parted, the two men took different

directions,—the lawyer returning to the gate with the germ of an idea in his mind, which the last portion of his conversation with the Marchese had generated there, and which subsequent circumstances tended to develop, and the Marchese Ludovico going in the direction of the *Palazzo del Governo*.

END OF VOL. II.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY SMITH, ELDER AND CO.,
OLD BAILEY, E.C.

ND 11-8-60

PR
5699
T4S4
1890
v.2

Trollope, Thomas Adolphus
A siren. v. 2

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY